

## Don't Mind the Rain

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/35501962) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/35501962>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Explicit</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">M/M</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Video Blogging RPF</a>
Relationship:	<a href="#">Clay   Dream/GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF)</a>
Character:	<a href="#">Clay   Dream (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF)</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Alternate Universe - Modern Setting</a> , <a href="#">Explicit Sexual Content</a> , <a href="#">Heartache</a> , <a href="#">Angst with a Happy Ending</a> , <a href="#">Getting Together</a> , <a href="#">Anal Sex</a> , <a href="#">Childhood Friends</a> , <a href="#">Hurt/Comfort</a> , <a href="#">Christmas</a> , <a href="#">Sad GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Emotional Hurt</a> , <a href="#">Scared Clay   Dream (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Protective Parents</a> , <a href="#">Coffee Shops</a> , <a href="#">Blizzards &amp; Snowstorms</a> , <a href="#">Crying</a> , <a href="#">Emotional Baggage</a>
Language:	English
Collections:	<a href="#">read☺☺☺☺☺☺☺</a> , <a href="#">DsmP</a> , <a href="#">scrumdiddlyumptious</a>
Stats:	Published: 2021-12-18 Words: 40522

## Don't Mind the Rain

by [venus43](#)

### Summary

George has never been adept at making friends. He's quiet, and he's well spoken, and the traits that made him every parent's favourite back in London only served to make him the freak of America. And yet the boy next door, with the golden hair and the charming smile, didn't seem to care. In fact, he seemed to love how different George was.

Time changes things though, George supposes. The people that once made him feel at home have long since moved on, even if he hasn't.

or, george finally comes home for the holidays and dream is still the best person he ever met

### Notes

aaa!!! coming home for the holidays, hope o served the idea justice!

a few things that i didn't put in the tags, just because they aren't like colossal themes but i figured that i should mention them as a warning. george isn't depressed in this fic, but there are mentions of depression as a topic when he's thinking, it's only explicitly stated in like two paragraphs, but it does kind of show in a few of his actions and thoughts so if that's a tough topic then id either proceed with caution or not read !

also, the italicised scenes are all flashbacks, they aren't exactly in chronological order but i think they're pretty self explanatory with the context of the rest of the fic!

enjoy!!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

It's at the darkest moments of the night, that George allows himself to grieve the things that he's lost.

In a cramped dorm room, under the light of a torch, George holds a photo and pretends it's a reality that he can get back—something that hasn't passed him by and surely left him in the dust. The ink is faded and the edges are uneven, and the way the photo has been folded and folded only serves to leave incurable crease lines, perhaps to rub it in a little more that it was printed what feels like aeons ago.

His roommate had gone out for the night. Apparently Americans are far more fond of Christmas parties than they are back home in England. In the most destructive of ways, George is glad he wasn't invited, that he doesn't have to go out and put on a well built façade for the people that don't even like him, to see. No. George can think in darkness and shine a torch around for feeble light. He's far better on his own anyway.

At some point in the night, the lamp on George's desk fizzled out, a burnt bulb limping on its last legs as he unscrewed it and placed it down next to the anchor. Not knowing how to screw in a light bulb is pathetic. George doesn't even know where the spares are kept.

He's not friends with anyone on his floor, or accomplices with anyone in his class. Alone, on a single bed, George is a shell. A shell that can't be fixed.

The bitter silence of loneliness is commonplace in George's dorm, enough so that he can almost convince himself that a friendless, resentful life is better than a happy one. He drowns himself in his own thoughts, pen flying across paper to mark a letter that he'll never post—it's not like he'd get a response anyway.

He stopped responding years ago. To texts, phone calls; George even tried the landline—nothing went through.

So at the darkest moments of the night, George finds himself calling his parents. He finds himself with tears on his cheeks and eyes rimmed with red, crimson, bleeding. It's ugly and utterly painful, but George can't quite remember the last time someone was there to soothe his sobs or muffle his thoughts.

Plane tickets are expensive and George can barely afford to live. Still, he finds himself hunched over a laptop, booking tickets back home, just in time for the holidays.

~

Maine was never much of a home to George. He lived there, of course, but he never settled. Perhaps it was inevitable that one day he'd move away.

There was something about Maine that felt unwelcoming, not to the average person, but to George. It was different to London, nothing close to the familiarity that he had had during his life there,

because everything he ever knew was in England: friends, family, everything. His parents knew that, not that they really cared. Though it wasn't quite a matter of whether or not they 'cared' enough to want to stay. When a better job opportunity arises, the only smart choice would be to take it—George can't blame his father for what he did.

But Maine was scary. A new school was scary, and yet George still tried to adjust. Even if he hated the state from the very first time he felt the air.

The high school sat next to the middle school, and the middle school next to Kindergarten. A close-woven community can't be breached, and yet George was forced to try. He hated the walks, and the shops, and how every business was run by a family that all knew every person's name already, because he'd never be able to open up one of those stores and carry on a generational legacy. His everything was back in London.

And yet when George looks back, the bitter anger that came with the move is overshadowed by the memories he'll never be able to forget. Because in retrospect, the only thing that made Maine bearable was the people.

George has never been adept at making friends. He's quiet, and he's well spoken, and the traits that made him every parent's favourite back in London only served to make him the freak of America. And yet the boy next door, with the golden hair and the charming smile, didn't seem to care. In fact, he seemed to love how different George was.

Time changes things though, George supposes. The people that once made him feel at home have long since moved on, even if he hasn't.

But here he is again, holding his bags as he stands by the airport collection point and pulls a hat over his head to cover his ears while standing in winter's chill. If it was inevitable that he would leave, then it was inevitable that he'd be back. Standing in a home away from home at the crack of dawn, waiting for someone to pick him up.

His fingers twitch, freezing through thick woollen gloves at the coldest point in the day. It only takes a second for George to adjust to Maine's temperature, but that's not to say he likes the sudden switch. The bite to the wind is familiar, chill wisping at George's nose and nipping it pink in the same way it used to when he was fifteen, hoping for a school bus to come and pick him up.

Around the handle of a suitcase, his hand cramps, a sharp shooting pain running through his arm that he shakes off in order to not cause a scene. It's cold, and the way the airport is still decorated, with red ribbons and the most abhorrent Christmas trees all the way up to the car exit, only serves to make George's eyes roll. If there's one season that he shouldn't have come home for, it's Christmas. Quite simply, George doesn't think himself up to the festivities.

His breath fans in front of his face, harsh puffs of clouded white swirling against the air just to taunt George with how cold he actually is. If there were a way to warm up then he'd take it, a second coat to pull on over his first and keep him wrapped up. But there isn't. And George is stuck waiting for his parents to finally arrive with nothing to do other than stand.

The family car is silver. It's nothing fancy, or big, it's just the thing they needed to get them around. When it pulls up in front of him, George almost cries.

"Hey, George baby, oh my goodness," his mother rambles, almost falling out of the car with how quick she moves to get to him. "We are so happy to see you."

Behind her, in a slower fashion, his father opens the car door too, stepping out with a smile that's

reserved for no one other than George. Perhaps it's sad, the way George's lungs collapse at just the sight of his own parents, speeding towards him with open arms while leaving behind a car that's certainly parked in an area it's not allowed to be, but when it's been nearly two years since the last time he saw them in person, George thinks he's allowed to feel a little emotional.

"Hey mom," he sighs when he's dragged into a hug. "Dad."

"We're glad to have you back, George," his father says, clapping a hand over George's shoulder just to let the feeling linger.

"We are," his mother comments, beaming. "We've been saying, university is great and all, but if you aren't happy there, then we'd much rather you just came home."

The airport is busy and yet George's parents block a whole section without a care in the world as they hug him, not even bothering to turn around and check where their car is being eyed. When his mother hugs she doesn't let go. She stands 5'6", up to his shoulder with her hands on his face, checking for every insecurity before wrapping them around his neck, pulling George into an embrace that he's missed, with honey shampoo and lilac perfume.

It's the most touch he's felt in a month, the most warmth he had since he last left Maine.

"I need the opportunities," George explains, as though he knows enough about his future to even care about his degree.

"You also need to visit, but you never do that," his mother tuts, slowly easing back to gauge George's expression. Her eyes are brown, heated with friendly fire as she smiles with enough compassion to ruin the world forever. And it's that kindness that George has missed, the way he can finally let his shoulders drop when he's not surrounded by the people he's isolated himself from, that makes his eyes start to sting.

His bags are moved before he can even offer to carry them himself. He's being led to the car before he can think of an answer.

He can't cry, not in the presence of the airport or with his parents' sorrowful eyes watching him, so instead he forces a smile onto his face, knowing it's weak and yet pretending not to care. Because he's here now, and he'll be here for a while; there's no use acting as though he's been the perfect son in the past.

"I'm here now," he offers eventually, sitting in the same seat of the car that he's always sat in. The one on the right at the back, because in London he'd be behind the driver, able to watch in the viewfinder and talk to his father in the passenger seat.

"You are." A hand reaches back, George's mother looking behind as she still sits in the right seat, no steering wheel in front of her because even though they moved—the permanence of their seats is still engraved into tradition. The ring on her finger scrapes skin as she clasps onto him and smiles, squeezing tight just so George knows she's there. "Let's get you home, honey."

~

The first thing that George notices is that Maine looks the same as it did when he was fifteen.

Perhaps then he never noticed the lack of change throughout the years, but now that he's spent time away, the only thing that George can think of is the way the same shops line the streets, the same décor in the windows and likely the same family in the back. In a ghost town, the only thing that can really exist is people. The ones in large coats and wooly hats, that went to the same high school as him and have known each other for generations. But those people aren't truly alive, perhaps that's why George knew he had to leave.

The posters are still the same, the graffiti under the bus stop still there, and George can almost see himself sat under the roof with his hood up and his friends next to him when he was sixteen and dumb, waiting on a rainy night to be taken home and forgiven for sneaking out.

Even his street is the same. The old lady who made raisin bran cookies every other week still lives in her corner house, cutting the grass with a mower that should be broken as the car rolls by, too slow to be getting anywhere effectively. With his head on his arms, George lets his vision tilt and stares out of the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of someone who'll bring back childhood innocence within the quietest of seconds.

It hurts—almost—how the world still seems to move even though George has been gone for years. And although Maine was never really his home, he still wishes he was missed—for people to have mourned his leave. But if being back causes a burn, then seeing *his* house causes a scar, because no matter how hard George tries to pretend that not seeing him has been easy, he knows his expression is see-through.

First crushes never really go away.

Stepping out of the car brings back frost. George pulls his coat tight around him and blows air through his lips, smiling silently when his dad passes him a suitcase and lets him find his own way to the door—past the house of he-who-will-not-be-named, and over to a paved path, stump stairs leading to the front.

“So a few things have moved around,” George's mother says with the keys in her hand, twisting open the door and letting George step in first. “Some new furniture, but you'll be able to get to grips with it.”

Change is stifling, and yet somehow, with everything laid out in front of him, George knows that if the house had been the same as when he'd left, he'd be in the ugliest of tears.

“It's cold in here,” he says before anything else, the gloves coming off of his hands regardless.

For a moment, he wonders if he's being rude. If he was meant to say something else when stepping into a house that's barely familiar and wondering how on earth he ended up back here. But his questions are answered quickly, when the door closes behind him and finally traps him in the hall, and his father steps around him and slides off his shoes to stuff them next to the rack.

“I'll start the fire,” his mother smiles, pushing away George's stress in the best way she knows how.

And even if it's not where he expected himself to be, George can't be too angry that he's back, dumbfounded and standing in a house that he never learnt how to love. There's a chance he would have liked it better if he got to choose the decorations, the furniture or the pictures, and although most of the small knick-knacks on the shelves came from back home in London, the joy that they brought back there didn't translate—it likely never will.

Careful fingertips run over the wooden planes of a cabinet, expecting dust and collecting none.

George remembers the day they'd unloaded it, when it had been dragged out of a van and his mother had yelled at the home movers for tossing it about with such little care. It's still in the same condition, despite the fact that there are a few more coffee stains rupturing the wood than when he'd last seen it, but all in all it's still the same cabinet, just as many memories lining the ledges as before.

The way he smiles should be sinful. Small picture frames lie cluttered together, holding a thousand things for George to pick apart. He can see himself at the age of one, and view himself again at seventeen, and the shells that he'd glued to the brim of a frame are still there, maybe falling, but still there.

Nostalgia is something that comes in waves. It's almost overwhelming, the way something strong hits him when he glances down at a line of photos and reminisces on the time where all of his life could be captured with a simple few clicks. Because at college he hadn't felt the need for the trivial things, and yet at home they don't seem to feel so trivial anymore.

It's like a portrait gets painted on the planes of George's mind, the most muted of colours brushing small strokes over the backs of his eyes when he glances at a photo and is reminded of the George that lived before he moved away—the one that still had hope for the world to come. Wandering fingers never slow, they roam further and further, George letting his coat open once the hiss of the fire starts in full.

His eyes flick up, landing on one photo that's almost hidden behind the rest, shielded by the clutter of a well-used shelf, and—oh. *Oh*.

George wasn't expecting to see that.

“Why is this still up?” He asks before he thinks, manhandling a photo into his grip and pulling it up, waving the image in the air like there's no chance of it breaking under steel fingertips.

The silence that casts the room is deafening.

“Oh honey,” George's mother says eventually, careful footsteps leading her to the shelf where she settles and sighs. “You used to love that picture. You look so happy in it.”

She pries it from his fingers, holding it up so the two can see. And although the intention is clear, the sight does nothing more than make George fall. In a familiar room, under eggshell light and a low ceiling, the anger of abandonment makes itself clear. Green eyes and blond hair drag back memories like the rope on an anchor, tugging and heaving and taking away all of the energy that his bones can hold.

Dream was an enigma.

In the misery that was Maine, a golden boy with the most cunning of smiles lived in the house next to George's. He was nosy and annoying, but most importantly, he was George's best friend. In the summers they'd go swimming, and during the winters they'd share the blanket that Dream's mom had kept in the closet upstairs, the one with the grey fur that was big enough for the two of them to hide under. And for once, things felt normal, like even without their apartment back in London, George could live.

When Dream grew up, George grew with him, quiet and disoriented, but letting the guy that made it all seem better whisk him away, with flash and charm and all the things that George never knew he needed.

The photo on the shelf should have been burned. George should have taken it to college and thrown it into a river to never be seen again. But he didn't. For better or for worse, he didn't. And now he's standing back in the town he vowed to never return to and looking at an old picture with venom that he should have matured far past.

"Yeah, well now I hate it," George spits.

His mother tuts, just in the way George knew she would as she tries to catch his eye and bring him back. "Hate is a strong word."

"Well it's a word I mean," George bites, a tone that he'll never be able to fully control, only forcing its way out of his mouth at the moments that deserve it least. And the shock on his mother's face is white, her surprise and her remorse, and the way her hands shake when she tries to place the photo back down, only making George melt.

"I'm sorry," she mumbles.

She doesn't know what happened between him and Dream, no one does.

"No," George sighs. "I'm sorry for snapping."

There's no use punishing the people that did no wrong, and there's no use holding a grudge towards a guy that's long gone. George still does both.

"Why don't you go unpack?" His mother suggests, a tight-lipped smile holding all of her features together. Crumbling is awful, George has seen it on himself a thousand times, and yet when he watches the glass shatter behind someone else's eyes, it feels a million times worse.

"Okay," he says softly, turning away with a nod. His bags are by the stairs, ready to be taken. "Same room, right?"

The nod he gets is weak.

The stairs creak in the exact same spots they used to, around the very top of the landing where George can't help but step. Even after a few years, he still remembers the exact places to pad across when he doesn't want to be caught, and if he were thinking more, then he'd make a game out of the blind spots. But he isn't, and instead of taking the time to reminisce on the good, George finds his room with tension in his bones.

Suitcases get dumped at the door, no grace in the way they fall hard to the ground. The door is the same, George isn't too sure of what he had expected, but it's the same, still scraping against the hinges when he pushes it open and takes the first step in.

Reminiscence is even worse than nostalgia—somehow it feels more painful.

The posters are still on the walls, the blu-tack that had held up polaroid photos still stuck to the wallpaper like there's something to hold, and George had been so careful when taking those photos down, putting them in a box that he took all the way to university, just for the main face to not even care that he'd left—to practically desert him just because it was easier than picking up the phone.

His eyes stay glued to his bed, barely managing to process the things that he can see, and despite the bitter memories that the house next door, and even his own room, hold, it feels good to be back. To be with his family.

In winter, George's room is cold. Even with the fire and the shitty, shitty heating, the frost on his

window somehow manages to dive deeper to infest the sheets and douse the blankets with cold. It was always hard to adjust, because back in London it was freezing, but at least there the heating worked, and even if the landlord insisted on keeping it a certain temperature through every month, his duvet was thick enough to keep him warm.

Being back almost feels freeing. In the most confusing of ways, George stands still at his doorway, unable to drag his feet any further even though it was him who decided to come back. In hindsight, the decision seems rash, like George should have thought things through a bit more before he folded and decided that taking a visit back to the town that he hated was a good idea. But he's here and the flight back was already expensive, there's no chance he can buy a ticket sooner—especially since Christmas is so close and all of the planes are likely overbooked.

It would be harder to hate Dream if his presence wasn't everywhere.

George can see him in the sheets, and plastered on the walls, and even on the ground, golden footsteps are still present from a guy that hasn't been around in years. If George were a better person then he'd be over it, understand how moving to a new state can tear people apart, but at the end of the day, Dream still left him. And he made sure to do it in a way from which George could never truly recover.

The footsteps that trail up behind him are light, calm.

"Most rooms we decided were in need of some paint, but yours we wanted to keep the same," his mother says, a gentle tone curling in the air.

It's a small thing and George isn't sure if he appreciates it.

"Thanks, mom," he says anyway.

There's a hand on his back almost immediately, slowly letting him know that someone's close enough to hear his thoughts.

"We really are happy to have you back, you know?"

And a part of George *is* glad to have stepped foot in the house he half-grew up in, to be drowned in snow from the second he stepped off of the plane, and was forced to be reminded of all the things he'd tried his hardest to forget. There's something about winter that brings out the world's joy, the way Maine strings up lights for a holiday that half his town celebrates, and keeps each shop lit nicely for the evenings, is only part of it.

Although, George has never properly spent a Christmas in Maine. Every year, through thick and thin, their family have found their way back to England, all settling in his grandmother's house for the cousins to clamber into, and George has found comfort in that routine; why would he want to change that?

And every time he came back, he'd be flooded with stories from Dream and everyone else about how good their holidays had been. About how they'd all gone to Winter Wonderland and fought in the snow, stayed up late on Christmas Eve to watch the lights get even brighter and see the carolers step out. It sounded nothing like the days that George had had, where he'd stayed in two rooms and put up with his cousins throwing food and bickering while he sat between the adults and the toddlers, not quite sure where he should stay.

Maybe it's that part of him that's glad to be back, standing in limbo while he's treated like broken glass.



“Thanks,” he murmurs.

“I mean it,” his mother insists. “This’ll be good for you.”

There’s a pause where he doesn’t answer. Another where he wonders why he came back.

“Maybe you can get back in touch with Sapnap, or Karl,” his mother suggests, lightness in her tone even though George doesn’t deserve it. For a second it feels as though she’s weighing her words, trying to figure out if she should say the next sentence, then sighing before saying it anyway.

“Maybe Dream?”

George flinches at the name.

“I don’t think Dream wants to speak to me,” he says with hate. “But Sapnap, we stayed in touch. I’ll see if he wants to talk.”

Staying in touch may mean something different to Sapnap, but in George’s book they’re still friends—especially after so many years apart with nothing to do other than call. That’s a fantasy that George could only imagine extending to some.

A quiet hum. “That’s nice.”

And the next words feel far harder to force out. George doesn’t think about them too much. He knows that if he did, then he’d surely never be able to speak them in full, but they still cut when they force their way past his lips and drag up all of the things he’s been thinking since he got here.

“Mom,” he says aloud, trembling and weak while frost turns into ice. He needs to know. After everything, he needs to know. “Did–Did Dream ever ask about me? How I was doing? Anything.”

Friends don’t break up in the way relationships do. They’re far more complex. Friendships aren’t as hard to maintain as relationships to start, they don’t need the kissing or the touching or the things that George had put up when he’s dated around, instead they value loyalty. And with loyalty comes contact, mere, feeble contact.

Friends don’t break up in the way relationships do, and yet somehow, the heartache they cause feels so much more agonising.

“Oh honey,” his mother sighs, one hand coming up to brush over George’s arm, just settling for a moment. “All of the time.”

~

“George, c’mon.”

“Dream, I don’t think I can do it.”

*The ledge is scary. George’s hands tremble as he stares down at a drop that’s taller than him. A fall that he can’t quite push himself to do. It’s tradition, apparently. For the summer to start with the kids all running from the edge of the shore to the water, landing with a splash by the rocks that are sharp enough to cut. George hasn’t had the opportunity to try it for himself.*

“You can,” Dream yells, a beam on his face that’s so bright it catches the lowering sun’s glory.

*The water is green, white swirled through a crashing tide. And when blue wraps around Dream’s*

*waist, the only thing the blond decides to do is let it, perfectly at ease with the waves as they curl.*

*“What if I can’t swim against the current?” George shouts back, shivering and cold with eyes all on him.*

*“I can swim for both of us.”*

*“And if you can’t?”*

*“George, trust me. I can.”*

*And Dream manages to look genuine, even when he stands so far from George that his figure is blurred, when his hair is wet and skin is blue with frost. This is the best that things will ever get, and it’s the worst that they will ever be. It’s the earliest that the sun will rise, and the brightest that it shines; still George closes his eyes and wonders what it feels like when a star fizzles out.*

*The ledge is scary. George jumps anyway.*

~

Closure is a thing that George doesn’t get very often.

When he’d moved to university, Dream had left him with a promise to call, one that he swore he’d never break. He’d promised that they’d still play games all day, and that they’d talk like nothing had ever changed, and stupidly, George had believed him.

During the first week, George had hope. He’d ring Dream and ramble about how nice his professor was, or how the guys on his floor had invited him to round for the induction week, and Dream had seemed normal, happy, like he couldn’t believe the opportunity that George had gotten either.

But one day that all stopped. No final text, no steady falling apart. One day, Dream decided he was too good to be a friend, and so he decided that silence was the only real way to end things.

To say he left George broken would be an understatement, because broken is weak. When glass breaks it shows fragility, and yet when George did the same thing he didn’t feel fragile at all, instead he just felt pain. Pain turns into anger after months, and for a short period of time that was the only thing that George could process.

Anger towards himself, for not knowing what he did wrong, and anger towards Dream for being able to up and leave so easily. And from that moment on, George knew that he couldn’t go back to Maine, because there’s no telling when an old face will pop back up and bring with it all the feelings of frustration it left.

Although, now George has been back for a whole two days and there’s no sight of the guy that ruined his life. Even the home next door looks abandoned, though George can’t see that being true—no one in this town ever really gets out.

There’s no real way to measure friendships. In every aspect, Sapnap and George were a different story to him and Dream, perhaps a more normal one. Every Thursday, like clockwork, at 9pm sharp, Sapnap would call George from the comfort of his own home, sitting back in a reclining chair with his headphones on and his webcam fuzzy. George would answer with earbuds in, slouching over a laptop that barely worked just to try and keep up the contact.

The first message that George sends to Sapnap once he's back is short.

Hey. I'm in Maine.

The response he gets is even shorter.

Wtf

And even with the way that Maine drains him of all of his energy, George knows when he should try and find happiness in the people that he hasn't fully had in years.

Which is exactly why, on a cold, cold morning in the middle of winter, George finds himself sitting on a park bench, his hands shaking with frost as the snow piles up around him, no festive spirit being dragged along with it. He's dressed appropriately for the weather and yet he can't help but feel like a fool as his coat bunches up where he sits, not long enough to stretch over his legs.

Snow is pretty this time of year, George thinks, watching nothing and everything at the same time. It's delicate, calming.

Against the snow, Sapnap is loud.

"Oh my god," he almost yells, rushing at George with open arms and a smile that could never be matched. "I've missed you, dude."

Standing up only takes George a second.

"Sapnap," he mumbles, dazed.

"I can't believe you're here." There's an arm wrapped around his shoulders, dragging him into a hug that leaves him breathless. "Going off to some stupid fancy college and leaving me here."

The words shouldn't hit George in the way that they do. Sapnap looks older, and it's been years so of course he does, but with slight stubble and darker hair, Sapnap looks aged, as though just because George left, his life didn't.

He stands smiling, full cheeks and a cap on his head that's pushed up to let himself see up against the sunlight. Fingerless gloves aren't practical but they're worn, and George can only imagine the kind of shit that Sapnap got up to while he was away, if he's still the same stupid kid that George last knew now that they're back in person.

"I didn't leave anyone, you idiot," he chokes, scoffing through a smile.

There's a moment where Sapnap breaks the hug, where he leans back and looks into George's eyes, maybe analysing the way George's hair has gotten longer, enough so that it dangles over his forehead and makes the edges of his vision fuzzy.

"God, it is great to hear your voice." Sapnap sounds truthful.

"We called all the time."

Over the phone, Sapnap's voice sounded grainer, raspier maybe. There's only so much background noise a microphone can pick up on, and after time that sound becomes commonplace, even though it shouldn't be. Standing in open air, not having to isolate in the dark and strain to hear the friend that didn't abandon him is nice. George misses being able to do it every day.

"I meant in person," Sapnap says. "It's so great to see you again."

*It's great to see you too*, George wants to say. Instead he rolls his eyes and bears a grin. "You're so dumb."

"You're dumber." The touch starts to drop, Sapnap tearing himself away just so he can force a scoff to one side and not let whatever look lies in his eyes be seen.

For a moment, George isn't sure what he should say, if he should explain the reason for his sudden appearance. Because quite frankly, Sapnap doesn't really know what's going on with him. They talked of course, but why plague him with the worries that George had been holding? It was always far easier to lie and say everything was going great before swiftly shifting the conversation topic towards something else.

The look on Sapnap's face isn't obvious. George isn't too sure how he's meant to react to it.

"Stop being stupid," Sapnap says after a while, letting a carefully placed moment to think flicker past. "It's just me, everything's the same as how you left it, there's nothing to be scared of."

"I'm not scared," George all but snaps. He's missed Sapnap's support.

"Well, you look it," Sapnap shrugs. "And all I want to do is catch up, so quit being an idiot and talk to me."

There's no point in denying that offer.

"Sit down," George says in place of a protest. "I want to hear about everything."

~

"It's cold."

Winter bites at George's nose. His feet ache as he walks a path that's been dusted with salt and grain to keep it clear, and Sapnap stands to his side with his hands in his pockets as they move.

"That's winter for you," Sapnap shrugs from next to him. "Snow's like a bitch."

Catching up is easier than George had expected. The tales of summers that have passed and school years that have flown by are all so familiar that George can almost imagine being there himself, witnessing all of the stories that Sapnap tells as though they're a fond memory for him to reminisce on. And time apart doesn't break everyone in the way he'd been scared of, because with Sapnap it doesn't feel like they're different people, it's just as though there's more to talk about than before.

It's bittersweet in a way; when Sapnap talks, he smiles. He tells stories that make his eyes crinkle and head tip back, laugh so light that George almost has to strain to hear it. And although there's no part of George that should be entitled enough to think that in his absence the one guy he thought he'd have forever would cut himself off from everyone, not just him, the way that Sapnap clearly omits one name from every narrative he's telling is so obvious that it hurts.

"Well, is there nowhere we can go?" George says after a while, snow catching on the top of his hair as it falls like speckled white. "I'd rather not freeze all of my toes off."

A hum. "There's a coffee shop," Sapnap suggests. "You remember—the one next to the antique

store.”

“That’s still open?” George asks incredulously. It’s not as though he’d thought it had closed down, because every place he’s ever been still seems to be here and thriving, but the childhood memories attached to each building make the prospect of them still being here outlandish in the best possible way.

“Yeah,” Sapnap nods. “So are we going?”

On the ground, as they walk, footsteps are pressed into clear snow, soiling a path that without the two of them would be flat. The streets aren’t busy, during the day they’re calm, before the night, when the business of Christmas markets and oncoming panic sets in. Less than three people is all George has seen, two of which he’s known since high school and fell out of touch with as soon as he stepped foot out of that place.

Close-knit friendships are all he ever really made here, no acquaintances and no mutual friends, just the people he’d give everything up to be with and the ones he wouldn’t—George has never been good at the trivial things anyway. After class, George, Sapnap and he-who-will-not-be-named used to go and sit on the tall stools of the shop next to the antique store, ordering hot chocolate from the nice lady in the back who would give it to them for half-price on account of knowing Sapnap’s mom.

It’s a nice place, snug tight and with wide-open windows at the front that curve around the corner of the street, and George has to hide the light in his eyes when he thinks fondly of the way they used to spend half of their time there—simply existing in a town that never seems to adapt.

“Of course we are,” he smiles.

And although George has spent so much time away, the path still seems to remember where to take him.

The palms of his hands feel sweaty in the pockets of his coat, skin tacky with warmth when they move in the dead cold. Sapnap stands just slightly in front of George when they make their way down narrow paths, passing tall lamp posts that stand with sharp black points on the whitest day of the year. And George knows the day is kind, but when he lived here even the prettiest of skies couldn’t stop the nights from feeling so isolating.

Reminiscence and nostalgia go hand in hand. George thinks he might hate both.

On the edge of the road, the coffee shop looks the exact same as it had before, the same poorly put up sign hanging off of the front as it stacks snow and catches sun.

It’s been a while since George has cried, maybe days, which isn’t a considerable feat normally, but it is for him. So the way that he falters at a windowed door and small brown seats is embarrassing.

The door handle is low, George pulls it open with his right hand and hears the chime of a bell above him. Warmth hits him in the strongest puff, his coat already making him overheat where he stands and lets Sapnap in behind him. One hand moves up to brush his hair from his eyes, a partially-empty coffee shop not even bothering to glance and see who came in, and the last thing that he sees before his world turns to dust is the same set of piercing green eyes that have been locked onto him ever since he stepped foot into the building.

It was inevitable that George would run into him at one point, thinking that he wouldn’t was idiotic. And the cold sweat that works the back of his neck must be obvious in the way he pales

and hears a sharp intake of breath from lips that he can't even be sure belong to him.

“Oh.”

Sapnap can see it happen. He can see the way that George's posture goes stiff, and he can track his eyes over to the counter where another body stands in tandem. They're not perfect people, no one is, but George didn't think that one imperfect person would be able to affect him so much.

A staring match is hard to get out of. George's tongue seems to dry and that feeling behind his eyes just gets stronger. He shouldn't have come back, he's never been good at confrontation, and when said confrontation is in such a small space, George doesn't even have the guts to yell.

In George's mind, Dream was always going to get out of here eventually. By the time he turned 20, Dream was meant to have boarded a plane and grabbed a journal to hop to the other end of the country while documenting every second. In the grand scheme of things, maybe George didn't matter that much—not when leaving is hard and Maine has always been Dream's family.

But seeing him here feels worse than abandonment. Because Dream hasn't left. Dream hasn't found himself a life and a home in a foreign country. No, Dream is in the same town they grew up in, serving coffees and shitty smiles on the corner of the street while George hasn't rested well in a year.

Even after the torment of growing, Dream looks good. The ability to seem indifferent is something that's always been foreign to George—all of the little emotions that he can't stop himself from feeling have always been plastered onto his every feature. And he's never been the most adept when it comes to knowing how he really suffers, so the fact that everyone else can see it before him is the most daunting feeling of them all.

“George.”

Dream's voice is deeper than it had been the last time they spoke. When he's quiet and shell-shocked, he sounds soft, as though he can hardly imagine that George is on the same planet as him in that moment. It's a pity that George wasn't there to see him change, but then again, that wasn't his fault.

Still, Dream stands behind the counter of the shop, looking up as he abandons his place to express his confusion. Brows knit together, a jaw stays dropped, and all George can do is breathe.

“George.” There's a hand on his shoulder. Sapnap is at fault as he stands in front of the door. “I forgot, I'm so sorry.”

The big decisions are always the hardest to make. In the face of danger, prey is only given a split second to react—most tend to freeze, some fight back, but the smart, they run, far far away with the hopes of never being caught. In the face of danger, Dream stands strong, and George—George is so tired of running.

He doesn't bother with an answer to ease Sapnap's worries. Instead, he walks forward, pulling his wallet out of his pocket as his eyes flick up to a menu to find something that'll ease his worries.

“George,” Dream says again, testing the word on his tongue to see if it still fits. It sounds awful when it lands on George's ears, enough to make him flinch pathetically, but he hopes that Dream can't see that. “George.”

Annoyance runs through George's veins.

“Yeah, that’s me,” he bites.

The silent treatment is all that Dream deserves and yet George isn’t able to give it to him. Panic makes George blind, he has no idea if he should say something and let all of the anger he’s had bubbling up for so many months finally go free, but in present-day he’s standing in a coffee shop with a guy he thought he’d never see again and all of a sudden that plan goes to shit.

“George, what are you doing here?” Dream asks like he’s worthy of an answer.

This time, George may not run, but he still doesn’t have the strength to say words that matter. “Can I get an Earl Grey tea please?” he asks, ignoring the blank look in Dream’s eyes. “To go.”

It’s almost comical—how Dream doesn’t move a muscle, standing in front of George with eyes that are blown so wide and an expression that can only convey confusion, perhaps awe if George dares to assume. And the fact that Dream has the gall to act as though he’s the one that should be shocked by their meeting is what makes George’s blood boil as he forces nonchalance.

“Please, talk to me,” Dream asks, practically begging with just puzzlement on his tongue.

“That’s rich, coming from you,” George spits, knowing full well that he should be above the petty drama that never really fuelled his teens. “Last thing I remember, you wouldn’t return my calls.”

“George please, let me explain,” Dream tries. Without words he looks apologetic, standing with a face that George only finds punchable.

If he were a weaker person then he’d crumble, right there by the counter of a coffee shop while Dream’s false sorries are spat into open air. But George owes it to himself to stand strong.

He’s cried on countless nights because his best friend and first real crush decided that he wasn’t worth a phone call anymore. The boy that gave him everything is standing in front of him, not hurt or injured in any way that wouldn’t allow him to simply pick up the phone and send a message in George’s direction. No. For a reason that George will never understand, Dream left him to drown by himself in a foreign state in a foreign country, and George shouldn’t be able to forgive him for it.

“Fuck you, Dream,” He says with a breath he’ll never take back. “There’s nothing for you to explain. You said that me moving wouldn’t change anything, and I was stupid enough to believe you, so fuck you if you think that now I’m back, we can be friends again.”

The dumbfounded look on Dream’s face isn’t deserved. He switches from confusion to realisation before finally landing on regret, an inadequate reaction to the way George glowers in front of him.

“I have a break in ten minutes,” Dream says with a fret. “I didn’t think you’d come back.”

“Right.” George shakes his head. He won’t let Dream see him break.

From behind him, there’s a cough. Just Sapnap making his presence known as George engages in a conflict that he doesn’t even want to be a part of. In a small town, everybody knows each other, everyone’s families are close and their grandparents all know each other too—George doesn’t need the attention from people that never really accepted him in the first place.

So with a smile that’s false and a stance that’s useless for hiding his shakes, George pretends that he’s over his outburst—shaking it off the best he can while keeping his tone light. “Earl Grey tea please.”

“Where are you staying?” Dream asks. “At your parents?”

Incredulously, he doesn't give up. George's anger is deep in his veins. It's running through his blood and causing his lungs to deflate with ten times more force than necessary. And Dream must know what he put George through, so why won't he just give up and let the wound scar instead of picking and keeping it fresh?

“Please just answer this one thing.”

“Yes,” George relents, not because of defeat but because he doesn't know how long this will last if he doesn't. “I'm at my parents'.”

When George was younger, he used to admire how expressive Dream could be. Now that he's not sixteen anymore, that trait is more annoying than anything. He watches as Dream busies himself behind the counter, pushing buttons and grabbing a large cup with a small Christmas tree on the front to pour George's drink into.

The whole of him thought that Dream would grow out of this town too; it almost feels wrong for Dream to still be here, doing the part-time work that he hated since he was a kid. But at the same time, Dream has always been well-suited for this kind of life, and George can't feel too confused at the prospect of him never truly learning how to grow.

Dream turns back with downturned lips, slowly sliding the drink onto the counter space between them as George pushes the money (with exact change) onto the space too.

“I really do miss you George,” he says, like it's simple, like him not keeping in touch was just to be expected.

The anger is simmering. In lieu of vex, George thinks of the way he'd grieved Dream in death as though it wasn't just a friendship that he'd loved and lost, to let himself feel the resentment he knows he's entitled to.

“Yeah?” His response is bitter, so calm that only Dream will ever hear the intent. “Well, you have a funny way of showing it.”

The drink is warm against his fingers, burning ice when he picks it up and cures his frostbite in milliseconds. He can barely stand to look at Dream's face for too much longer, so he turns on his heel and throws a death glare in Sapnap's direction just because a simple interaction is enough to ruin his day, maybe even his week.

Dream being so untroubled about it all is the thing that really gets under his skin. Because it's enough to know that he hurts every day because of something out of his control, but to know the other party just thinks they can fix it all with a smile and simple reunion is what sharpens the knife that sticks out of his back.

“Let's go, Sapnap,” George mutters, stalking towards the door with bitterness on his tongue.

Sapnap stands blank in front of him. “I didn't get my drink.”

“I said, let's go.”

After that, their day is cut off far too soon.



~

*“Dances are stupid.”*

*On an idle swing, in a nearly empty park, Dream sits on a plastic bench with his hands blue from cold, his head tipped back while an ill-fitting suit hugs his skin—hanging off of his shoulders in the most unflattering way possible.*

*“You’re just saying that because no one asked you to go,” George scoffs from beside him, fingers curled around the cool metal of apparatus.*

*It’s almost midnight, far too late for the two of them to be out in a random space, drinking flat Coke and missing out on the opportunity that everyone in their grade practically spends their whole year planning for. But George can’t say he feels as though he’s really losing too much, because he’d far rather sit in the darkness with Dream than stand in the corner of a shitty disco room while Sappnap mopes over not having a date.*

*“That’s where you’re wrong Georgie-poo,” Dream mocks, sweet charm dripping from his tongue as he leans to one side to let his head brush over George’s shoulder. “Amy, Sophia and Imani asked me to go.”*

*To say that Dream is popular would be an understatement. In the most confusing of ways, Dream is liked as though he could do no wrong. For the most part, George can understand how so many can succumb to Dream’s charm, but what he’ll never be able to wrap his head around, is how throughout the years, even with so many tailing behind him, Dream always seems to choose George.*

*“Why didn’t you say yes?” He asks, half-joking, but there’s a real question behind his tone, something that only someone who knows him as well as Dream can pick up on.*

*“Because I wanted to spend the night with you.” Dream throws him a glance that’s not one-note, a glance with a thousand layers that George has to force himself to not read into. At this time of night, Dream is pretty, but that’s not a thought that George should be having when they’re alone. “If it weren’t for me, you’d still be in your room doing homework right now.”*

*“I like homework,” George jabs softly.*

*“No one likes homework.”*

*He laughs into the night and lets his expression stay loose. On the swing, he leans back, almost imagining how it would feel to actually be a part of the community, to go to the small gatherings in the school that are so valuable. It wouldn’t be awful—to have someone be interested in him enough to want to go with him to dances and parties—someone that isn’t just Dream, because there’s only so much that Dream can give him, and George has a feeling that Dream doesn’t see the things he does.*

*“Dances aren’t stupid, though,” he says despite himself. “I wish someone had asked me.”*

*Vulnerability is the scariest of feelings. George watches as Dream stands up wordlessly and scuffs his shoes against dirt and pebbled grass. He watches a golden boy flash a smile and twist in moonlight, practically begging George to come with him using an extended hand.*

*“What are you doing?” George scoffs, rolling his eyes as his eyes flick up from Dream’s hand to his grin.*

*“Asking you to dance,” Dream shrugs.*

*He offers a bow, tugging an overly formal blazer around his stomach to stop it from falling too much when he bends over and grins through shaggy blond hair.*

*“There’s no music,” George comments, stubborn for stubborn’s sake.*

*“We can do without,” Dream offers. Understandably, George doesn’t move a muscle, keeping blank boredom in his expression when he gets an exasperated sigh and sees Dream lean back up to try and convince him.*

*In childhood, the most important parts of a person’s life are often simple. When George grows up he wants to look back and smile at the guy he used to be—shake his head when he reminisces on his dumbest moments, like the time he and Dream stole a trolley from the supermarket just to run across a field and see who could go the fastest. He thinks that these subtle, insignificant moments may shape him forever. And he knows that the way Dream does his best to give him the world will ruin him for every other person.*

*“Now George, baby, light of my life, honey dear, will you dance with me?”*

*Sometimes, George thinks that Dream doesn’t know the effect of his own words.*

*“You’re an idiot,” he huffs, grabbing onto Dream’s hand anyway to tug himself up.*

*“You love it.”*

~

Around four nights into his stay in Maine, George sits on the couch in the living room with a cup of hot chocolate in his hands—a drink so sweet that he’ll never fully grow out of liking it.

The window is closed, blinds tugged shut just so no one can look in and see George curled up with pink cheeks, brown tousled hair blurring his vision as he watches a sappy movie that’s so predictable there’s no use even trying to follow along.

That morning he watched his father wake up and come down the stairs to see where George had passed out on the couch. He stayed silent as the curtains were tugged open to let in some light, that blinding winter’s sun casting perfect shadows across the room. And as soon as his father had left, he’d stood up and walked over to the window, pulling the blinds back across in case someone could see him be vulnerable.

Although George hasn’t heard noise from the house next door in days, there’s no telling whether Dream will finally waltz through the door when George is in exposure. It seems that the other has a knack for bringing up the things that George thought he was past.

A few days to settle, and a few days to think.

George wonders if running away from Dream is the thing that got him into this situation in the first place.

He’s asked himself this question a thousand times, and yet he can’t stop himself from asking it again, questioning if Dream’s the one that should feel guilty, why does it hurt George so much to see him in that state? Etched into his mind is the expression of recognition that Dream had worn.

He can't forget how green eyes had widened with shock and a lower lip trembled and quivered in anticipation—almost as though Dream had been bracing himself for a fight.

Acting nonchalant is more painful than making a scene though, George notes. And when he wants Dream to feel pain, he still wants him to know why he feels it. That loneliness is the thing that's changed George forever.

At university, the problem was always George. He was the root of all evil as he cut himself away from the people who had spoken to him during that first week, just to try and message Dream one more time and explain how things were going. Self-destruction is a painful phrase to say though, so George will sit and he'll ponder and he'll pin all of life's wrongs on the "best friend" that didn't care enough to call.

"We were thinking of doing a smaller Christmas this year," his mother says during the afternoon, head poking around a wooden door to let a nervous smile show. "Just me, you, your father and your grandmother. She said she'd fly out instead of us going to England."

"I like going to England for Christmas," George mumbles.

It's been a while since their last trip. George misses busy streets and pound shops with ugly aqua uniforms.

"So do we, honey," his mother says, sympathetic even though George doesn't think he deserves it. She takes a step past the door, leaning forward to push his feet off of the couch and take the place for herself. And when she does so, George feels the pressure on his own shoulders dip with her weight next to his. "But we also quite like just doing our own thing. We think it'll be good for you, just some family time instead of the normal chaos."

Chaos is what George likes. It's the perfect time to get out of his own mind, stop thinking about all the things that keep him stressed. Chaos is what keeps George sedated.

But he owes it to himself to take a step back, to sit in the darkness of the room and stop being angry at the world for simply going on while he doesn't know how to stay sane. He knows that punishment is all he deals, unforgiving torment being thrown to everyone who so much as looks at him wrong since Dream did what he did. And perhaps it's time to repent, repent and understand that no one will ever be perfect in the way that George thought Dream was.

"Okay," he sighs, quiet.

"Okay?"

"Okay." He places his mug on the table, allowing for a weary mind to ease up and his mother's expression to lighten. "I'll help dad get the decorations out."

~

*In sticky summer heat, bare-chested with a grin, Dream lies on George's bed with his head hanging off the edge. His lips are red with the remnants of a popsicle, sun-drunk smile plastered onto his features where he sits and stares. And George doesn't mean to look but he does—when it comes to Dream, he can't help himself.*

*"Don't sweat on my bed," George grumbles, long shorts and his whitest tee hanging off of his body like they're repulsed to live too close to him.*

*“Where else am I meant to do it?” Dream laughs.*

*In winter he’s burning, yet in summer he shines. George can barely imagine how he looks in contrast, with sun-drunk smiles and not enough preparation for the warmth outside.*

*“I don’t know,” he mutters, no malice in his tone. “Maybe at your own house.”*

*“But I don’t want to be at my own house,” Dream complains, rolling onto his front to reach out to try and touch the other. “I want to be with you.”*

*“You’re an idiot,” George scoffs.*

*It’s been sunny for a week, the temperature climbing every day until the heat became unbearable. The windows in George’s room are wide open, he sits next to one and drops his forehead on the windowsill to try and escape the heat. They only have a few more months of this, the summer, and then it’ll drop back to the unbearable cold that the residents know best. So George puts up with the weather and does his best not to complain, because if he does then winter will only hit them harder.*

*“Let’s go out,” Dream says when boredom becomes too much. He leans his head on his hand, gaze tilted to one side when he makes eye contact with the other.*

*“Where to?”*

*A pause. Dream is usually the one to make their plans. George doesn’t trust him enough to think they’re ever good ideas, but he trusts him enough to know he’ll always have fun. Dream’s hum is quiet and calculated—enough to tell George that he’s thought it out for long enough and is finally getting the opportunity to say it aloud.*

*A quirked edge, Dream’s grin rising, and George can barely stop his scoff at Dream’s next words. “I’m thinking we go skinny dipping in the lake.”*

*“No way,” he deadpans, rolling his eyes to the ground.*

*Funnily enough, Dream’s worst ideas are also his best, for if George was any weaker then he’d have lost the ability to speak at the mere suggestion. But during the day, George can only muster up a laugh, pretending his nights aren’t filled with corrupt thoughts of Dream swimming through the water and holding George’s hand to drag him along too.*

*“Why not?” Dream asks, slowly sitting up without the intention of forcing George to see the way sweat collects on his chest, even though that’s what happens anyway. “Don’t think you can handle my full form?”*

*“I don’t want to handle you at all,” George mocks.*

*“Yeah you do,” Dream says, wiggling his eyebrows like he can see straight through the other. It’s enough to make George still, pretending to huff as Dream grabs his socks from the floor of George’s room to pull them on. “C’mon, let’s go get ice cream, the place next to the antique shop has got a cooler full of, like, the best vanilla there is.”*

Sapnap's apartment is almost bare.

The shelves are almost empty, idle picture frames dotted along each room in an attempt to make the place look more homely. And if George were a nosier person then he'd ask about the boxes that are open along the hallway, halfway packed as though the contents are still yet to come.

In the corner of the room there's a Christmas tree—perhaps the saddest sight that George has ever seen, because aside from fake frost and wispy leaves, the strung-up lights look lonely by themselves. Apparently Sapnap didn't put it up by himself; when he was taking off his shoes, George was told about the way Sapnap had invited around an old friend and asked for help with setting up the tree.

In the end they hadn't really focused on the decorating, more so on catching up.

"I'm sorry about the other day," Sapnap says at one point—once he's let George settle and has found the time to pour them both a drink of something warm. "With Dream."

"It's fine," George says, masking his feelings by bringing the cup close to his lips and sighing into it. "Not your fault."

No matter how far he seems to get, Dream still haunts him, whether that's in memory or in the fact that he can appear unannounced at any given moment. Feelings are natural, and George has learned to accept his lowest moments along with his best, but still, as soon as Dream's name is dragged up in conversation, he can't help but flinch.

"He told me about what happened between you two," Sapnap says, smiling weakly with his legs tucked up underneath him on the couch. "Not a lot, but he said a few things."

Curiosity is what peaks first. Frustration is what appears second.

"Yeah?" George asks, a sharp sharp tone cutting air like it's skin. "What did he say?"

A pause is lethal. It's simmering seconds and the hesitance of words. Sapnap glances out at glistening lights and hums, allowing for George to lean back and brace himself for an explanation. "You should probably ask him that?"

Although he's curious, George doesn't think himself able to talk to Dream. He doesn't think that he can speak and keep his cool past a few seconds, in fact, the way he was able to get out of that coffee shop without exploding is far past him. George has never been known for his rationale, on the scale of emotion to fact Dream has always sat on the lower half while George lets his bad thoughts control him—even though he's perfectly at ease with their existence.

Winter holidays never really help his mind. Festive nights and gingerbread candles are all he sees when he goes out, families and friends flood the streets, they smile and they laugh, and even in the comfort of someone else's home, George can see their joy and feel his loneliness.

"I don't want to," he mutters in explanation, not quite defeat but horrifically close. "I don't think I ever want to talk to him."

"Really?"

"Of course, really." George is snapping now. He can't help it. "He's a dick, doesn't deserve to speak to me."

For all reasons, George knows that Sapnap isn't the one to blame. They may be friends, but they don't know everything about each other; *god* George has more secrets than he has truths. But blurry thoughts make him angry, and anger makes him spiral, because doesn't he deserve an explanation? Maybe he blew it off when it finally struck but what was stopping Dream from reaching out years ago to try and make things right?

The room is quiet. Sapnap waits for George to continue with a raised brow.

"So what did he say?" George relents, breathing hard when he rolls his eyes.

Sapnap hums. "Huh?"

He's got a certain knack for getting under George's skin.

"Dream," George deadpans. "What did he say about me?"

It takes Sapnap a moment more to respond. Each time he speaks he seems to take his time, like he's carefully deliberating the best way to break George's heart and wondering how best to shift all attention from irritation to understanding. But he still knows not to tread too cautiously, because in George's eyes flames burn with hot embers, begging to not be treated like glass despite that being his only chance of survival.

Sapnap takes a breath. "He said that he was proud of you, that he was scared about losing you to the city."

And that's rich. In a whole world of excuses Dream really chose the one that made him sound like a saint, the fucking excuse that made George appear as though he up and left instead of it being the other way around. Dream is fucking stupid, George has known that for a while now.

"Well, he lost me," he spits. "In fact, I'd say he pushed me away."

The worst part is Sapnap doesn't even seem to disagree with him. He nods his head and purses his lips, glancing at George and shrugging like there's no other way to explain it. "He definitely fucked up."

"That's an understatement."

Somehow, even with resentment in his veins and depression in his stance, George manages to be curious. The part of him that's still hanging onto the past keeps him on the same conversation topic as before. Maybe because it's not really hate, it's just devastation.

"How is he?" He asks, sucking in a breath when Sapnap doesn't respond.

He should have left like George, at least given him a reason to think that Dream lost his number or ran out of Wi-Fi, not just that he really couldn't be bothered to call.

There's no way to verbalise that without still seeming hung up on it all. George knows that from the moment he opened his mouth he was fucked, digging himself a deeper hole with no hope of being dragged out of it. So he accepts defeat and says what's on his mind, unable to sound indifferent when he speaks. "I know he had plans to travel and write and all that, so why is he still here?"

"That fell through," Sapnap bats away. "Family stuff. I don't think he could ever really convince himself to leave."

Dream always liked Maine far more than George. He grew up here, so of course he did. The attachment he felt to a city that never really felt like home is far beyond George's capacity to understand. Maybe the only way for him to relate is when he jumps back to London and pretends his life wasn't ruined when he moved away.

"Do you miss him?" Sapnap asks after a moment.

Silence speaks more than words ever can.

"Sometimes," George admits. He takes a sip of his drink and tries to bring back his confidence. "I think maybe I'm more confused than angry nowadays."

"You were mad at the start?"

"Yes," George scoffs. Umber eyes don't know where to settle, they roam and run and hold all the nerves that the shaking of his hands should. "I thought he was my best friend. I thought we might be more at one point."

"You guys were always close."

"No shit," George laughs.

They say the first stage of grief is denial. One night, on a lonely day, George looked up a study and tried to understand his own feelings, diagnosing himself with a broken heart before he'd even finished reading the article. Denial is refusing the truth, it's the way George had stared at his phone in confusion on the first day that Dream ignored his call and didn't bother to return it later. Denial was how George had scoffed and made sure to call Dream twice the next day, only to be ghosted again and again until even calling Dream's mom felt rational.

The second stage is anger.

George had thrown his phone and cracked the screen when he messaged Sapnap and asked if Dream was ill during the second week, only to be told that the other was perfectly healthy and had been going about his days as though nothing had changed, only to sob onto Sapnap's shoulder in private while refusing to tell him the reason why. Anger resonated in the way George studied for essays, how he paced around his room and scraped his pen on paper to make notes that stuck up from the paper as though he'd had a fight trying to mark everything down.

Anger was the only thing George felt for months.

In spring, George finally learnt bargaining.

Bargaining was telling himself that something might have happened out of his control. Maybe Dream lost his phone or forgot his number, perhaps he got so swamped up with his studies that there hasn't been a chance to send a message in six months. It's a futile train of thought that's so quickly overpowered by the push and pull of *does Dream not care anymore? Or is he planning a flight to George's dorm next month as a surprise?*

George never really managed to get out of those first few stages, but he still moved on to the last as though he had.

The fourth stage was perhaps the worst.

Depression manifests in many ways. For George, it was ruining the life he'd worked so hard to lead.

Depression was dejection in its lowest form. It started with his mind, self-destruction resonating in how he only checked his phone if it was important, and how he blamed himself for the fact Dream didn't want him. In battle, sadness is pathetic. In life, George thinks of it as the ghost that's chained to his feet, intended to drag him back whenever he finally manages to move on and pretend he's not the cause of every pain he's ever felt.

Acceptance was the hardest step to take.

George can't change the past. He can't do anything to influence someone else's decisions from 500 miles away. The only thing that George can do is dodge the hurdles that are thrown at him and realise that sometimes just moving with life as though it's not a challenge, more so a game, might just be the only thing that keeps him sane.

There are a million things that George wants to say. He doesn't quite know how to phrase them.

"There's a party," Sapnap says once the silence becomes suffocating. "At the coffee shop, you should come."

"Will *he* be there?" George asks, too thoughtful for malice.

"Probably."

"Then I don't want to go."

Acceptance means nothing when the past keeps being forced back to the frontlines.

"You need to talk to him," Sapnap says, being that dumb know-it-all that he always has been. "Eventually."

A sigh, honesty in a broken voice. "I don't think I can do that without breaking down."

There's understanding in Sapnap's eyes. That might just be the thing that makes his tone a thousand times more pitiful. "Just let him explain why he did it."

"Why should I?" George asks, fighting it still, because for someone who claims to have gone through all the stages of grief he still knows self-respect and its simplest attributes. "He lost all rights to feel sad when he abandoned me."

"I'm not saying you have to forgive him, just talk to him." Sapnap brings warmth to his lips and drinks while George watches, just giving him the time to process and consider before he rejects it fully. "And if you're still angry at him once you're done, I know his apartment number, we can send him my shit in a box."

Laughter is far more simple than hate. George has missed being able to let joy show without feeling vulnerable.

"You're gross."

"You love me."

~

*The park is empty on a Sunday. Most families are in church or setting up shop for the Monday to come. George has learnt Maine's schedule by heart just so he can stand in a broken playground and know that at any second, Dream will show up and not have to fight off the other kids their age*



*to find his way in.*

*But this Sunday is different. George sits on a swing and rocks back and forth while he waits, already sensing something different by the wind when it tousles the fine strands of his hair. By the time he sees Dream, he's bored, having waited for what felt like aeons, and all he wants is to hang out with his best friend and not feel as though it's the weekdays already and he has to show face.*

*And yet the thing that's most noticeable, when Dream walks towards George happy and grinning, is the fact that he's not alone—he's being tailed by a guy far shorter than him that doesn't quite know where to look when he glances over and sees George.*

*"George, this is Sapnap," Dream says with a smile, turning from one to another. "And Sapnap, this is George."*

*"Hi." Sapnap is quiet, George doesn't think he likes it.*

*"Hi," George mumbles in response, before turning to Dream with creased brows. "I thought we were just hanging out together."*

*He watches Dream's face contort into something of confusion, a smile tugging the edges of his lips as he lets out a chuckle that's more air than laugh. And in all honesty he doesn't know what's so fucking funny but he still lets a hand be placed on the back of his neck to push him slightly along so they aren't too in Sapnap's face.*

*"He asked to come along," Dream explains. At some point the height between him and George had just grown, meaning that George has to actually look up to see Dream when they're in such close proximity, not that he didn't have to before, but now it's that much more apparent. "Wanted to meet you."*

*"Meet me?"*

*"Yeah," Dream shrugs, smiling. "I talk about you a lot."*

*Intrigue pulls on the corners of his tone. "Good things?"*

*"No, George," Dream laughs, shaking his head as George warms up to the occasion. "I tell him awful, awful things about you."*

*"It's true," a voice pipes up. "He does."*

*Without a black lens over his eyes, George glances over at Sapnap and tries to be nice just so he isn't being hostile. The grimace on his face is obvious, making it look like he's assessing the other rather than just sizing him up to see where Dream found him.*

*"He doesn't actually," Sapnap jokes, ignoring George's disgruntled expression in favour of continuing to push across the impression that he wants to last. "He just tells me the stupid stuff." There's a slight pause, a small smile creeping onto Sapnap's face when he makes eye contact with Dream and then turns his focus to George, allowing for the tension to ease up with a little personality. "Like that time you guys went skinny dipping in the lake."*

*"Dream!"*

*~*

In winter it snows.

London never did much snowing. Occasionally it did, maybe in January or February, but during the weeks leading up to Christmas, snow was never much of a regular occurrence for George to get used to. Maine always told a different story.

It's cold, the wind makes him tense as he walks down the street, hands in his pockets and head facing the floor so as to not get too ruined by the weather. It's the same every day it seems—each time George leaves the house, just to be surprised by weather that's so predictable he almost has a guide to each day just based off of the year before. And the slow, constant walks that he takes aren't to sightsee or find something exciting, they're just to ease his mind.

Despite being back for almost a week, George hasn't seen as many people as he thought he would. It's almost as though he had expected everybody, except a few golden memories, to have stayed in the exact same stage of their lives, but now that he's thinking back, perhaps George wasn't the only one eager to get out of a place that was never really home.

On the shops there are wreaths, green leaves with red ribbons that act as place markers on white streets. There's barely more than a week left until Christmas—George doesn't think about it too much because if he does, then he'll have to face the fact that eventually he'll have to go back to university too.

But the festive spirit doesn't dampen his mood too much; in fact, the joyful people on the streets and the way lights are strung up on mini-Christmas trees in front of every store half makes him smile.

The bite of a frosty morning is always going to get to him. As of late, he's been waking up at 7am to spend an hour moping in the front room before showering and forcing himself out, past the houses that have been lit up all night, and through a frozen park. And usually, the only people that are up are the toddlers being taken to nursery and the pensioners still trying to make the best out of a drab life, which is exactly why George is so caught off guard by someone that isn't exactly a stranger.

"Oh my god," a loud voice yells, confused and awe filled. "George, is that you?"

On the other side of the path, tall and blond, maybe a bad reconstruction of someone similar, a guy stands and waves in George's direction, grinning from ear to ear when he finally gets the other's attention.

"Hey," George greets, forcing himself to sound happy when his eyes widen in recognition. "Liam, oh my god it's been ages."

When George was sixteen he had his first boyfriend. It only really lasted for a week and they never even kissed, but they promised to stay friends, just because it was simpler than saying they were never really meant for each other. When George was eighteen they got back together, it was still more of a fling than a real relationship.

Liam takes a stride across the road, not bothering to look out for cars simply because he knows there won't be any. And he does his best to make George feel as though this is something he'd have never expected—that seeing George again was the last thing on his list.

"It has," he says, opening his arms to drag the other into a hug that pulls him into the other's neck, awkwardly placed while he doesn't know what to do with his hands because he never got the chance to take them out of his pocket. "You look good," he's told on the lean back, Liam smiling

with the tops of his eyebrows knitted together in something that isn't clear. "Y'know when I heard people saying you were back in town I thought they were just pulling my leg, but no, you're here."

And if people are talking about him, then he's been here for far too long. In a small town, news travels fast, it's toxic and scary and makes George feel that the walls are closing in on him at every given moment—it's why he doesn't know how to pretend he's entirely happy to be here.

"Yeah, I'm back," George says through gritted teeth.

There's a hole in one of his gloves, George can't help but push his fingers against it while he tries not to be rude and keeps the ill-performed smile on his face. Perhaps he's not as see-through as he thought, because Liam doesn't seem that scared of the person George has become—instead he acts as though nothing's changed, attempting to catch up while snowfall makes sight impossible.

"So what are you doing here?" Liam asks, not platonic in the way George had first thought. "I thought you went off to uni."

"I did," George nods. "I'm back for the holidays though."

He doesn't mention why the holidays seemed so important, or why staying in Maine is the only option that doesn't make him want to rip his hair out, he just hopes that Liam will assume the best and not bother him with more questions.

"Cool-cool. Well, I was going to go grab coffee," Liam comments. The raise of his eyebrows is clear, George can predict the next words before they even leave his lips. "If you want to come."

And there's suggestion in the tone, maybe an invite to something else if George reads into it a little further. He smiles at the ground and grapples with the thought inside of his mind, blond hair and green eyes have always been his type, but Liam just isn't the one for him, they found that out a while ago.

But opportunity strikes when he least expects it, and with anger in his head and regret in his heart, George agrees.

"I'd love to." He watches Liam smile, pretends it's someone else even though he fucked that whole chance over just a few days before. "Which place are you going to?"

"Oh, the one by the antique shop," Liam says, and if he knew the way George schemes then he wouldn't have said it. "If that's cool with you."

Maybe Dream won't even be there. Perhaps he's got the day off or he won't come in until late that day; either way, George doesn't feel bad about agreeing—he wants Dream to see that he's happy, that he doesn't need him around anymore.

"Yeah that's fine," he says, grins even. "That's fine."

Walking with Liam feels weird. It's not like Sapnap in the fact that they talked every day despite the difference, practically still knew everything about each other even though they haven't spoken face-to-face in years, and it's not like Dream because George can actually go ten seconds without wanting to punch him in the face, still, it's weird—George isn't too sure if he likes it.

In early morning, most of the signs on the shops are grey, not lit-up because they're conserving the energy for later. Strangely, George far prefers the mornings to the nights, they feel far less forced.

The coffee shop always seems to be open—George feels bad for the people scraping shifts to

afford a town like this. And he smiles when he lets Liam open the door for him, pull it back and step through, maybe because he's glad to escape the cold or because he wants someone else to see the action.

Bitter resentment isn't unfamiliar to George—he's always been petty and he's always taken everything to heart, but this feels less like payback and more like pity. It's almost as though he's trying to dull his feelings by making someone else's spike.

"You know what you're going to get?" Liam asks, bumping George's shoulder with his elbow.

Emptiness is all George sees. There's one person in the corner with a cup of coffee and a slice of cake, other than that the girl behind the counter is the only life in sight.

"Uh—yeah."

As if on cue, the girl behind the counter looks up, fleeting eye contact being made with George before her face turns ghost white. There's a moment where she sits and another where she stares, but before George can take a step forward and recite his order, she's disappearing into the back, no sign of ever coming back to her place.

But of course that's not the case. Within seconds, Dream is rounding the corner, looking up at George with wide features and parted lips that ask what he did to convince George to come back. George would argue that he did nothing, George just likes hurting himself.

In an awful way, George feels bad for letting himself be dragged into someone else's plans. He doesn't know if he should speak, because god he really thought he wouldn't be back here without Sapnap, but here he is—ordering coffee from the guy he hates because he might want to make him jealous.

"Hey George."

The mind works in mysterious ways; George is chickening out before he's even done anything of substance.

"Do you want to order together Liam?" He asks, turning to one side and glancing up. "Or separate."

"We can do together."

Cosying up to a guy he doesn't like is pathetic, George does it anyway.

He turns to Dream and moves until he's touching the counter, glaring almost when he spits, "I'll get tea, Earl Grey."

Liam is oblivious to it all. "Me too."

If George is bad at masking his emotions, then Dream is worse. He turns around and flicks on a machine with more force than necessary, only forcing his eyes away from George when he has to.

The thing about tea is that it helps with his nerves. It stops George's hands from shaking, from both the cold and the things that terrify him—somehow it dulls his senses until he realises that self-destruction can also come in the form of taking his ex-boyfriend to see your ex-best-friend and hope that one of them throws a fit because they actually like him, aren't just pretending so in a few years they can fuck him over.

“Is that Dream?” Liam asks, he isn’t quiet but George thinks he intends to be.

“Uh, yeah,” he says. Why is he even here? “It is.”

The shirt Dream wears is tight, it moves with him as he pours drinks and plots what he’s likely going to say.

“You guys used to be inseparable,” Liam notes. “What happened?”

And George doesn’t need to be told the things he knows. The only thing that that does is make him angry, mad, because yeah they used to be inseparable, but then Dream decided to fuck him over and never speak to him, so no shit they’re not talking like they had before.

“Nothing,” George snaps. “People just change, okay?”

Two drinks are on the counter before George can even put the money down. He looks up to see Dream’s face and all it does is remind him of the guy that ruined everything.

“George, can we talk?” Dream is dumb. George hates that at one point he would have done anything for him.

“Can you not see I’m in the middle of something?”

“I know.” Dream’s eyes flick from George to Liam, challenging him the same way dogs bark at each other when they pass in the street. “But I also think we should speak.”

It’s childish, immature—and maybe George orchestrated it, but Dream doesn’t have to be this fucking obvious when George is here with someone else. He doesn’t get to have that much audacity.

“Jesus Christ.”

George isn’t above it all but he can pretend he is, maybe that way he’ll finally catch a break.

A cough from one side tears his attention away from Dream and the staring match he’d unknowingly been participating in. Liam looks at him with confusion and hurt, emotions that George knows far too well.

“I think I’m going to go, it was nice catching up, George,” he says, glancing at Dream and then glancing back. “You guys...” Hands are thrown up in exasperation. “...whatever.”

Careful footsteps lead Liam away, the jingle of a bell showing a door’s open and close. It’s cold outside, the gust of wind that’s blown in only reminds him of that, and for the first time in forever George is thankful to be thrown into a room with Dream, because at least the room has heating.

“Did you have to ruin my date?” George asks. He can’t help but engage.

“Please,” Dream scoffs. “That was barely a date.”

And all too soon, George remembers why he hates Dream. He remembers exactly why Dream is such an asshole, and why he didn’t want to speak to him the day before. It’s a dumb stand-off, George doesn’t even know why he’s participating other than the fact that he wants to yell and he can’t do that anywhere else without feeling awful.

“You’re fucking ridiculous,” he groans, rolling his eyes like he didn’t ask for this to happen.

He watches every single side of Dream, the anger turns to sorrow, and the sorrow turns to a firm line instead of lips and another hidden emotion behind the eyes. George can't tell his true intentions, that's the worst thing about it all.

"George I know you're mad at me, but you have to at least let me explain."

The statement is rich. George hates everything that Dream stands for just because it hurt him so much to see. He hates how Dream looks sad, almost guilty, exactly how he should look. But apologising now can't change the fact that George doesn't know how to properly deal with friends anymore—he's been alone for so long that the thought of spending precious time with someone from his past hurts far more than it should.

Letting go feels good. Being able to spit poisonous words without repercussion feels great.

"No, you do not get to say that to me," George retorts, crumbling. "Not when you left me when I needed you most."

He watches Dream glance around, sees him try and keep a good reputation by checking who else is in the shop. "George, let's talk, normally please."

"You are unbelievable."

Dream snapping should be inevitable. George doesn't like that word too much but he knows when he's pushing the limits and even though he doesn't have the place to, seeing Dream get angry only feels like a reflection of his true colours. "What do you want me to do here?" Dream asks, arms up as he whispers out his yells. "I'm trying but you keep shutting me down."

He does. He's perfectly entitled to do that. And maybe in retrospect George feels slightly bad for refusing to even listen, but that's only slightly, Dream deserves everything that's coming to him for breaking George's heart.

A pause.

"Fine." George shrugs. "We can talk."

Shock lays like a layer of snow on Dream's face. "Really?"

"Yes."

The rise of an eyebrow. George is testing him.

In the mornings, he lets himself look at Dream, because he knows that at night he won't be able to. In strength, there's weakness, and George's weakness will always be a pretty face and complete adoration—the dedication that people like Dream will only ever fool him into thinking he has.

Mornings are for confidence, nights are for lying dulcet and letting everything not be fine.

The winter might be the thing that freezes off his emotions too, because in summer, George was always far more agreeable.

"I'm really busy this week," Dream mumbles, saying his words like they haven't been rehearsed, like he really didn't expect to get this far. "But uh, I'm free on the 17th, if you want to just come here after my shift at five."

Toying with people is cruel. George knows that. He's never really called himself a good person,

though.

“That’s fine with me,” he says.

In the worst possible way, Dream’s smile is gorgeous. It’s blinding and catches the little sun that the day holds close. And George doesn’t want to speak to him, but getting confusion off of his chest feels like the only thing that’ll stop him from losing his mind.

Even when wearing gloves, the air is cool so when George holds onto his drink and allows a sip to make him regret what he’s just done, at least his hands are warm. On his way out, Dream smiles at him, pretending that they still know each other enough to wave and act as though everything is fine.

“Bye, George.”

George pretends he’s too busy opening the door to return the gesture.

And when the 17th finally comes, George doesn’t go. He gets dressed and he sits by the stairs, deliberating how long it would take for him to walk before he checks his watch and realises that even if he left right now then he’d still be at least 3 minutes late.

So he wanders back upstairs, shutting himself in his room until his mother knocks and drags him out of bed, forcing him downstairs to watch a movie with her and his father.

Acceptance is the final stage of grief—however it doesn’t mean forgiveness.

~

*When Dream turns eighteen, he throws a party.*

*Half of the town seems to gather at his house, all smiling as Dream’s parents let them in and shake each and every one of their hands. It’s nothing like the night Dream spent with George the day before—the one where they ran through the streets and snuck into places where they shouldn’t be on a final night of freedom. And although George knows that in formality, this isn’t Dream, he still can’t help but notice how at ease Dream seems with putting up that happy façade.*

*He’s always been popular, with ambitions that make everyone’s parents love him and eyes so bright that their children want to know him too. And although the finer points of those plans are always kept tight under his belt, everyone already knows that Dream is far bigger than Maine—George just hopes that he won’t be lost when Dream realises that too.*

*On the couch, George sits in another family’s home and tries not to make himself seem too much like an intruder. He sips bad juice and talks to Dream’s grandmother—the one that always gives the two of them money to go get food and stuffs her pockets with hard-boiled sweets for them to break their teeth on.*

*Out of the corner of his eye, he can spot Dream looking at him, as though the other can’t keep his eyes in his head for more than one minute, and it’s that disgusting fondness that makes him laugh, almost happy at the fact that in a room of a hundred, he’s the one getting the most unyielding attention.*

*At some point George is stolen away by a guy with jet-black hair, one that's slightly taller than him and smiles with a boyish grin. He's far past the turning point, so he doesn't pay him that much mind. His sights are already set on another and although it may be partially hopeless, George is still dumb enough to yearn.*

*Later that night, when George looks across the room and sees Dream introducing himself to the people his parents invited, talking so naturally that their smiles seem real and their proposals seem realer, George knows that he's going to go far.*

*It'd be impossible for Dream not to.*

~

On some days it snows more than usual, George doesn't really think about it.

He doesn't bother with checking the forecast, or calling ahead to see if Sapnap can pick him up instead of making George walk through thick and thin just to get to an old coffee shop and mingle with people he won't like. No. All George does is pull on another layer and try not to stress, because that's the one thing that he doesn't need to be doing right now.

There's something different to the air, the atmosphere. Maybe it's guilt—George probably holds too much of that. On long, early morning walks George avoids the town completely in favour of going to sit on a random bench in the park where he practically grew up.

There, he can sit and not regret the fact that he stood Dream up, because Dream probably deserved that. In place of guilt, he feels sorrow, something that's so similar with so many distinctions that George doesn't really know how to cope with it.

He's been dreading the Christmas party more than anything. It's not festive to gather a bunch of people that don't know each other in a small room and blast overplayed songs that none of them really like. George would argue, in fact, that it's actually more festive for them to stay at home, with their families and Christmas trees, where they can all safely ignore the idea of buying presents and leaving later.

But he agreed and now he's going. Because to the people that deserve it, George is true to his word, why wouldn't he be?

The calendar on the wall behind the fridge tells the date. George checks it once when he's going downstairs to find his shoes. It's the 20th, Christmas is around the corner, and George doesn't know if he should be happy or scared for it all to end.

Over the years, a collection of Christmas sweaters dwindled. George lost half his clothes when he left, either placed them in bags and then forgot about them, or grew out of the material and never bothered to get it replaced. Either way, he's here now, having dressed in his warmest beige sweater and his nicest black coat, just so he doesn't freeze while he walks at darkening night and ignores the cheer of the groups that follow.

Signs line shopfronts and they're all in bright light, words being illuminated under dimly falling skies. It's not hard to spot where he's going, every single road is painted to show him where to step, and maybe he'd have been able to talk himself out of even attending if it weren't for the fact that the greens and reds that reflect in the ice on the floor manage to distract him so badly that there isn't even a moment to think.



Some people listen to music while they walk—George was never able to get into the habit. Instead he fights against the wind and forces himself forward, pretending that the snow isn't falling so dangerously that it just might knock him out on the way down.

But he finds his way eventually. In half an hour's time he's rounding the corner that lines the coffee shop next to the antique store—a place that he hasn't really got a chance to look in since he's been back.

He waits a moment before going in, takes a step back and breathes in deep with the hope of chasing those unjust nerves away. There are people in the window, enough to make the place look busy and slightly cramped, and George already knows that Dream is going to be there, so there's no point in even trying to hope he won't.

But one night won't be awful—George has already made his stance clear on the whole *Dream* thing. He's made sure that Dream knows exactly what he thinks of him (whether that was intentional or not) and feeling a little bit of guilt is only natural. Dream should probably carry enough to feed a whole family.

Still, with shaking hands and pursed lips, George takes the handle of the door and twists it open, pretending not to flinch when eyes turn and look at the new arrival. With the way everyone stares, it's almost like being in high school again, being the only Brit in a group of people that are already well-accommodated to each other. And this isn't easy, nothing in George's life will ever be easy, so he sucks it up and offers a smile that doesn't meet his eyes, hoping he looks like he wants to be here.

But before he can drown, salvation comes in the form of the friend that's been there for him. Sapnap swoops in with another brunet on his arm, both smiling and standing close while they pull George that much further into the room.

"Hey, Sapnap," he says as quietly as he can be in this place, before turning to the side and letting recognition strike. "Karl?"

In high school Karl wasn't popular. He was mouthy and annoying and everyone liked him. He wasn't popular but he was as close as a person can get without burning, becoming insufferable and leaving everything behind straight after.

"Hey man," Karl smiles, one hand landing on George's shoulder to bring him into a hug. "I can't believe you're actually back."

"Yeah," George sighs. "Neither can I?"

They don't try to, but somehow they find a little corner to themselves, a place to stand and just hang around while other people move. And it's just a quaint little place, nice artwork from someone the owners know and glass windows that stretch high enough to see the roof of the building opposite, but George still likes it. In a way, it reminds him of city life even though they're so far from the city it's unimaginable.

"*God*, the gang's all back together then," Karl muses, some holiday inspired drink in his hands when he leans forward then back and looks around, stopping like he just had the greatest revelation on the planet. "I'll go grab Dream."

It looks as though he's about to leave until a completely inconspicuous elbow is jabbed into his side by Sapnap, who barely looks apologetic as he shoots a stern look in the other's direction.

“Should I not?” Karl asks, confused. But that only lasts a second because soon enough he’s turning his eyes back to George, eyes widening when he finally starts to think. “*Oh.*”

Feeling everyone's eyes on him might just be paranoia. In reality, George knows that they don't really care, didn't even notice the fact he came in. But that doesn't stop George from getting tense, because there's no telling how many people know about what went down between him and Dream—the bad blood that lies between them.

He leans against a wall and smiles with his lips pushed together, looking at the floor when everything else seems too bright.

There's music playing. If it's possible, now is the only time that George notices it. He hears Christmas songs and busy chatter, a full, happy room managing to suck the energy straight out of him. But he doesn't let it get him down. He puts on a brave face and tries to mimic the others, looking up at Karl and acting as though nothing in the world can ever hurt him.

The barista from a few days ago is still there, standing beside him and talking while she pretends not to peek. It's only right for George to give her half a wave before returning to his conversation—doing his best to not notice the way Karl and Sapnap exchange looks before Karl is joining in on awkward energy.

He touches George's shoulder again, squeezing softly before pointing off in another direction and lingering there. “I think I'll just...”

It only takes four seconds for Karl to escape.

Before he's properly gone, Sapnap is already staring at George with something venomous on his lips. He raises an eyebrow in an unreadable expression, pulling fingerless gloves through his hair while he waits for the answer to a question he hasn't even asked.

And George isn't a mind reader so he doesn't pretend to be. He watches Sapnap tug his jacket even closer around his waist, looks out at the snow that falls from the window as it sticks to the floor and makes no effort to leave. The jostle of people makes his ears ring, ugly Christmas decor makes his eyes do the same, and he's pushed forward by another person behind him, stepping a little into Sapnap's space as he tries to stay sane.

“What did you do?” Sapnap's tone is flat.

George isn't too sure how to respond. “What do you mean?”

“Dream's moping,” Sapnap says pointedly. “You did something.”

It does nothing to lighten the weight that guilt causes. In fact, it mostly does the opposite.

“I didn't do anything that he didn't deserve,” he says though, because Dream hurt him. George isn't nice to the people that don't treat him with the same respect.

“I believe that,” Sapnap shrugs. “You still did something though.”

“I stood him up,” George tells him. He doesn't feel the need to lower his tone, whoever's listening probably wants to hear. “He wanted to *talk*. I didn't want to feed into his bullshit.”

“Are you sure it would have been bullshit?”

Anger spikes in little red lines. Frustration is a slightly more muted colour.

“Are you my therapist now?” George spits, shaking his head in pure disbelief. “Stay out of it, Sapnap.”

“Whatever.” A shrug, simplicity. “Just trying to help.”

Everyone just wants to help. They all drag George from one end of the country to the other and tell him that he’s going to do great, that eventually he’ll just get over the things that have built up and ruined his life. So the little elf on windowsill and the Santa on the shelf don’t make George too ecstatic, he’s a bit too busy with distracting himself from the real world to try and force himself back into it.

“Well you’re not helping,” he tries not to snap. Misplaced anger has never done anyone any good. “Dream fucking hurt me, he knows that and I don’t owe him anything.”

“You’re so fucking stubborn.” Sapnap gives him a sigh, that’s it. A sigh that tells George he’s disappointed with what resentment has made out of him, but also one that tells him he still understands. A sigh. “I didn’t invite you here to argue, go talk to people, make friends, I’ve got to do something.”

Watching Sapnap stalk off doesn’t do much to lighten George’s mood. He doesn’t want to be here, at a stupid stuffy Christmas party when the snow is so cold outside and the night is so dark he’d probably be able to see it glowing in his palm. And he already made a drink before he came so there’s nothing to really buy, other than the little gingerbread cookies that are in a platter over by the front.

But even with nothing keeping him here, George decides to stay, because he wants to be a good friend and he knows how much this stupid party means to Sapnap. So he finds the first person with a kind face and introduces himself, pretending he isn’t scared of the chance they won’t like him.

It’s a guy in a dark beanie. He laughs along with jokes and offers George a sip of his festive pine latte, which George frankly thinks tastes like shit, but he doesn’t want to be rude so he smiles and pretends he likes it. The night drags, it only gets darker outside and the round analogue clock on the wall tells George that soon enough he’ll be allowed to go home. But that of course can’t happen without a few things going wrong.

“Do you know that guy?” He’s asked, pure sincerity in a person’s tone.

“Which one?”

He turns to look, scanning across a field to see someone he maybe knew from before, perhaps middle school even.

“The one staring at you,” he’s told. “Blond, handsome.”

A hand goes up to point. It’s not even needed because George knows who they’re looking at immediately. On the other side of the room, behind the counter like he’s still working even though he should be having fun, Dream stands with his eyes narrowed in George’s direction, a careful expression plastered onto his features.

He looks bad. To George the bad is still handsome, yes, but it’s not Dream’s best. His hair is slightly off and there are bags under his eyes that make it look like he hasn’t slept in days. And the red sweater that he wears with what seems to be a light-up Rudolph the Reindeer nose is more than a bit cheesy, but George thinks it kind of suits him.

“Unfortunately I do,” he says, body facing Dream completely.

It's a staring match and neither are winning. George looks at him and still sees his best friend even though he shouldn't. He sees regret and remorse, and maybe he shouldn't have blown the one opportunity he had to find some answers.

"Unfortunately?"

There's not much else to say. "Yeah."

In Maine, the weather is tough. Outside it looks to be a storm, snow blanketing the roads and piling up as it falls, making it hard for the cars to even cross the streets as they pull people back and forth. For most of the night, George sat at a table with some people that he managed to make idle talk amongst. He smiles and acts like he knows how to exist with them, but it's all one step at a time, and right now he's taking half a foot forward by just letting people ask him questions and giving them simple answers is as far as George is going to get.

He'd be lying to himself if he said he didn't have at least a little bit of fun. He ate gingerbread cookies and had a slice of a yule log that Sapnap brought, all while drinking the hot chocolate he'd have as a kid and nodding along at a table full of people he'd never thought he'd spoken to.

11 o'clock is when things start to shut off.

Parties die at 11, not when you're in university though, George knows far too well that people are up into the next day all trying to ride the high that other people's company brings. But in adult life, or as close as he can get to it, George is far too familiar with the sight of people all leaving at some unspoken yet agreed-upon time.

It's almost half past 11 when he texts his dad, glances out at the way the snow has just gotten heavier and asks for a ride. He gets a response fairly quickly with a message that says the car will be there in the next forty five minutes.

"I have to go," Sapnap tells him a little later. "Dropping Karl off. Do you think you could stay back and clean up?"

He says it as though he expects George to just agree, like there isn't a perfectly good reason for him to be completely against that idea.

"What? No."

Coats are pulled on, and drinks are cleared up by the barista that's on the way out, leaving George, Karl and Sapnap the only ones left in the front.

In silence, the coffee shop is far more agreeable, George likes the quiet a lot more than the chaos, even though the chaos is what he needs to survive. He watches Karl tug a blue-green coat onto his arms, smiling up at George while buzzed on far too much caffeine and everyone's noise.

"You're the only one left," Sapnap says, like that makes it any better. "It's just a few boxes of stuff."

The decorations are hanging from the ceiling like someone tried to drag them down. George knows exactly who he'll be stuck with when he has to help with putting it away.

"*Sapnap.*"

Seeing Dream again doesn't feel like it used to. It's not anger anymore, it's awkward. They both have their opinions and they're both entitled to them, not speaking all night and just sneaking

glances at each other definitely didn't help to fix the air.

"Just do it." A tilt to the head. Karl doesn't look too interested but George knows he wants to ask a bit more. "For me."

"Fine."

Sapnap disappears into the back and comes with Dream a moment later, making eye contact with everybody like this plan is the most fool proof thing he's ever come up with. Dream doesn't do much except stand there, looking to the side and then staring at Sapnap before Karl, then at George's feet.

The Christmas music is still playing—it doesn't do much to fix the atmosphere.

When Sapnap leaves, he loops his arm through Karl's, tugging him that bit closer to share warmth before the door opens. And George wants to hate Sapnap for leaving him here, like this, with the knowledge of what the other did to earn his loathing, but he knows that Sapnap does things with (usually) good intentions. This is just a small lapse of judgement that he can't fix because he doesn't want to make an idiot out of himself.

Karl and Sapnap are swallowed by the night, wrestling with the door to push it open before stepping out and not looking back.

If the weather continues in this way then there's sure to be a blizzard later, it won't be pretty.

Standing by himself on the opposite side of the store, George waits for direction and toys with his own sleeves by pulling them down past his hands. He doesn't want to look up but eventually he has to. The one thing he doesn't expect is for Dream to be staring right back.

"Just this stuff over here," Dream says, pointing. "You box it and I'll take it into the back."

"Okay."

Without a word, George does as he's asked. Now isn't the time to talk, not when he's tired and wants to go home, so he tries not to pick a fight and hopes that Dream won't either. Instead he takes tinsel from the tables and shoves it into the box he's handed, sliding it over to Dream once he's done.

There's a free table that George takes. He pulls his phone out and tries not to feel the tension in the air.

Dream talks anyway. "Do you have a ride home?"

"Yeah," George says, subdued. "My dad said he'd pick me up."

"Okay."

He's propped up by the window behind him, sitting in the perfect position to see the clock and the floor and not see Dream. It shouldn't be awkward. George wasn't awkward the first time he saw him. He knew exactly what he wanted and all the things he needed to say, but now that they're completely alone, George doesn't have the confidence to do it unprompted.

The wind sounds awful. It hits the window and the signposts and makes such a loud racket that George flinches when it gets a bit too close. The fact that he's leaning on glass doesn't make it any better though, because a pointed attempt not to look out only makes George scared of what he'll see

when he does.

“You can wait in here,” Dream says like George wasn’t planning on doing that already. “I wouldn’t want to make you stay in the snow.”

Cold. Short. “Right.”

Chrome green eyes are fixed firmly on George’s figure, not looking away when he glances down and scrolls through nothing on his phone. He expects it to stop after a second, when Dream realises that George isn’t in the mood to answer his questions, but it doesn’t. And frankly, it starts to creep George out.

“Spit it out,” he demands, looking up at an injured expression and pretending it doesn’t get to him.

Dream leans against the counter. He looks dejected and maybe he’s earned it, still George doesn’t know how to fit an apology in when his mind is running so fast.

“What?”

“You’re staring,” George bites. “Say what you want to say.”

He doesn’t get an answer.

“Whatever,” he mutters. “I’d like to wait in peace.”

Time moves slowly when there’s nothing left to do. It’s just the two of them, occupying a whole shop while Dream acts busy so he doesn’t have to try and apologise again. Maybe George feels bad about not letting him speak, he’s always been stubborn but often he goes too far. But that’s not the main thing on his mind. Right now he just wants to go home and go to sleep, bury himself under his sheets to recharge for the next outing he’s dragged to.

Eventually he gets a message—a stressed one from his dad that tells him the car is stuck a few blocks down and that George should come to him to help fix it. And it’s not ideal but at least it’s an out, an excuse for George to stand up and throw an unpleasant smile in Dream’s direction.

He steps to the door. Rattles the handle to try and push it open and gets nowhere in the process. At first he thinks it might be him, that the door won’t open because he hasn’t put enough strength into it, but that’s not right, he’s been in and out of here a thousand times, it can’t be him. And so George looks, properly looks, letting the dread start to sink in as he truly realises his surroundings.

It doesn’t feel real. George can see the snow piling up, notices how it blocks the entrance in every single way, but that can’t be right so he still pushes, pushes and pushes and curses when it doesn’t work.

“Dream,” he calls because that’s the only real option he has. “Dream.”

Looking back makes him notice the way that Dream has been trying not to watch. There’s the slow hum of Christmas music, the drag of tension as George realises what this might mean.

“The door won’t budge,” he says, dumb.

And Dream doesn’t share his panic, he simply shrugs, says, “Oh,” and gestures for George to follow along. “Come on, you can go from the back.”

“It’s so dark,” George mutters, mostly to himself as he wanders through a backroom close on

Dream's heels. It's even smaller here, not much of a coffee table and a few lockers the only thing he can see, but he's not too sure what he was expecting in a place as quaint as this.

The back door is large. It's steel with a long handle on the front. And George let's Dream take the lead and try to push it open, faltering when nothing seems to move.

"Shit," he hears Dream whisper. He expects that he probably wasn't meant to hear the admission.

George isn't dumb—he knows exactly what this means, how the weather has managed to betray him and keep him in close proximity of the last guy he'll ever want to see. It's daunting, makes his stomach drop when he thinks about how everything has happened, and he makes a mental note to punch Sapnap in the face the next time he sees him.

But this can't be happening. This can't be it. Because there's no way that the universe hates him enough to dump him in a coffee shop in Maine with *Dream* of all people, it can't be that cruel. And yet here he is, blocking out the thought while Dream pushes and shoves at a door that won't open.

"So?" George questions. If he doesn't say it then maybe it isn't true.

Dream doesn't follow the same train of thought. "I think we're snowed in."

There's a good and bad to everything. Most of the time George loves the weather, how it claws at his skin when he walks and keeps him sober enough not to sob every time he makes a step, but right now it's his greatest enemy, the thing that ruins everything. Because he can't be trapped here with Dream, he doesn't know how he'll cope if he is.

"I'm calling the fire brigade," George worries. He can feel a fretful expression wear away his skin, makes him panic as he searches through his pocket to find his phone.

"For what?" Dream scoffs. "This is snow, not fire." Even if he puts up an uncaring façade, George can see that he's scared too. "Besides, they probably have actual issues to deal with."

"Being stuck here with you is a real issue."

George can't stop himself from causing problems even when there's enough already. Without waiting a second longer he spins on his heel, stalking back into the front where the chairs are still in disarray and there's a small collection of mugs that have gathered on a counter. He can barely see the outside, how the wind twists with snowfall and throws ice and hail and all things harsh at the window.

It's not a pretty sight, and George might just forget how to breathe in the midst of everything around. So he pretends that the room isn't blue and black, that there isn't pressure building up behind his eyes and that Dream (ex-best-friend and complete asshole) isn't standing right behind him and watching it happen.

"I should text my dad," he mumbles to himself, reaching for his phone. There's a blizzard warning in his messages that he ignored, maybe that'll teach him to start checking the forecast.

There's no running when they're in the same room. Perhaps George thought he had gotten past that fight or flight stage, but he's here now and panic is spiking—George thinks that running back to university even though he hates it, might be the only thing that'll keep him sane.

A deep breath. Calm. Calm.

"How long until we can leave?"

"I'm not sure," Dream shrugs. "It looks like a pretty bad snowstorm."

"Well where are we meant to sleep?" George snaps.

"There are blankets in the back,"

Unbelievable. Un-fucking-believable. "Am I meant to curl up on a table?"

He hears Dream's sigh, watches him run a hand through his hair before stopping to cover his eyes, and for a moment he wonders if he's being harsh, but the thought disappears as soon as Dream opens his mouth again..

"I'm not exactly pleased about this either, George?"

"Why not?" George scoffs. This is probably perfect for Dream, there's no way for George to stand him up now. "I thought you wanted to talk?"

He doesn't have to look to see how Dream's expression darkens. "You don't though," he says, venomous. "I don't want to be trapped with someone that can't even bear to look at me."

"Oh please, you did that to yourself," George jabs. "If you wanted to be friends then you shouldn't have cut me off."

Arguing isn't the smartest idea when they're trapped in the same room for god knows how long. But they've never been the best when it comes to communication—at least now they're talking.

"As soon as that door can open, I'm leaving," he grumbles, sliding into a booth just in case his nerves spike and he ends up shaking, maybe even collapsing if it's bad enough.

Although he tries to keep up the brave image, on the inside George is breaking.

This can't be happening. It has to be a dream, a figment of George's imagination, that'll end up with him waking up sticky from sweat and breathing hard before descending into sobs. He's had dreams that started just like this before, most of the time they're over in seconds, a bad nightmare that he'll solve with a cup of earl grey and a few extra moments of sleep—but this one doesn't seem to end.

He's stuck in a horror that only he created.

"That's fine by me."

For the most part, they don't talk to each other. George sits with his arms down and his head on top in the same booth next to the window while Dream takes a spot behind the counter and reads one of the books he must have stashed in his locker at the back.

Awkwardness is the only thing that George can process. Maybe because everything else is too real to understand.

Around twenty minutes later, Dream is walking towards him, a foreign expression on his features as he stops and acts as though he didn't accidentally hit the button on his sweater that makes the whole thing light up.

"Hey," he says, pushing his hands forward and into George's space. "I brought you a blanket."

Grey material falls to the table, being taken up by a loose grip. Dream may be insufferable, but at least he's attentive. "Thanks."



“Are you cold?” He asks, watching George pull the material close around his body.

His coat is on the table, scrunched up in a ball even though it’d probably be warmer to keep it on. But when he’s getting cosy he doesn’t want to feel the scratch of a zipper or velcro from the clasp, he’s far more comfortable like this.

“Yes.”

Leaning to the side, George sneaks one more glance outside. It’s just as bad as before, maybe even worse, and his parents both messaged him with frets and worries that he batted away by saying he was safe, but safe doesn’t mean happy. And right now, George is sulking.

“You’re being weird,” he says when Dream continues to hover—just standing with his hands behind his back like he’s waiting for someone else to speak. A glance up features an annoyed stare, George’s hostility probably being thrown off by the way he’s holding a blanket tight around his torso.

“*I’m* being weird?” Dream splutters.

“Yes,” George says. Because he is being weird. Dream is ignoring the fact that George stood him up completely and is handing him blankets out of nowhere like they’re friends. They should be yelling right now, not making small talk and sneaking glances at each other when they don’t think they’ll be noticed. It’s wrong, a betrayal to himself even though George’s morals are completely skewed. So bitterness is what laces his tone, makes his words sharp when they run from his lips. “You’re looking at me like I’m made of glass.”

Dream doesn’t look like he knows the answer. “You just might be.”

And George knows what he’s doing. How Dream is probably in his own head and running through every simulation that’ll make it a bit easier. Perhaps George should feel bad too. But in retrospect, that’s easier said than done.

“I’m not,” are the only two words he’s able to get out.

George doesn’t need pity, certainly not from someone like Dream, and yet sometimes the pity feels good. Almost as if he still has someone that cares enough to feel bad alongside the perfect front. In Maine, it seems that all George has is sympathizers.

His parents feel bad, when they come down the stairs they hover for a moment before stepping out, trying to see if George is in the right state to see, and Sapnap sends him texts of little do’s and small gatherings, trying desperately to drag George out of the house with the hopes of seeing him happy.

In a way, it’s suffocating. George has seen enough pity in his lifetime. Yet from Dream, it almost feels deserved, like even though George hates it, he deserves to be looked at like pale porcelain, melting ice on a fire to see it drip.

But anger comes in tow too. Dream doesn’t just look at George with one expression. He has something behind his eyes that doesn’t get spoken, something he wants to get off of his chest as well. When George pretends to fall asleep he hears the lights get shut off, the sound of power dying reaching his senses before they’re descended into an almost pure darkness.

Dream disappears into the back before he can think to say a word.

He sits with his arms crossed on the table, a makeshift pillow for his head. And the blanket is

tucked above his shoulders and under his chin to make sure he stays warm.

There's a rumbling in the back. A crash and a bang outside.

Being snowed in with his worst enemy wasn't how George thought that his day would go. Because even when forced in close proximity he and Dream can't seem to get past that awkward bump that they've been stuck behind. Half-heartedly, George wonders how long a game of cat and mouse can really last before the cat finds something new to prey upon.

At around 2am, Dream comes back to the front. He steps quietly as to not disturb the peace and he just might think that George is properly asleep. The sound of machinery going off is obvious, and a little part of George feels weird about just watching so he sits up and pretends that the weather outside isn't making him shake.

"I can't sleep."

If it's possible, Dream jumps so far he almost hits the ceiling. He turns to George so fast that he probably gives himself whiplash, mouth slightly parted with pink, cherry lips.

"Yeah?" He understands. "It's loud out there."

"It's not just that." The tiredness probably loosens the lock on George's lips. "Being around you makes me tense?"

"How come?"

A scoff. George doesn't get up but he makes sure that Dream can at least see his face in shrouded darkness.

"You know why."

The sound of the drink machine going off only adds to the noise. Dream places a mug under it and lets it pour, swirling in milk and sugar so as to not burn his tongue when it gets too hot. He takes a sip, cocking his head to one side like it's made him all the more wise. "Tell me anyway."

And before George had blown him off, decided that Dream wasn't even worth his time because in a few more weeks he'd be able to escape again and never have to face his demons. But for now they're trapped, and George isn't strong enough to keep it in anymore.

"You abandoned me, Dream," he says, expressionless. "We were friends and then all of a sudden I wasn't good enough for you anymore."

Dream is an asshole. "Are you finally ready to have an actual discussion about it?"

"Don't be a dick."

"I'm not trying to be," he shrugs, placing his cup down so as to not scald his hands when the shaking starts.

Poison claws at George's chest, dragging its way up his throat to make his tone that much more spiteful. "It feels like you're just going to tell me I'm not allowed emotions."

Dream sighs, quiet. "I would never say that, George."

When Dream and George were friends they used to argue a lot. It would never be serious, only about the trivial day-to-day things that they'd surely get over by the time the day was done, but

maybe once or twice it got ugly, ended with them agreeing to never talk about it again because they were both too stubborn to really apologise.

“How are you being so cool about this?” George asks. It feels like his insides are tearing him apart.

“What do you mean?”

His eyebrows pull together, frustration bubbling because even if he thought he’d come to accept what’s happened over the years, Dream is still managing to test his patience. “I’m trying to talk to you and it’s like you stopped caring as soon as I did.”

“That’s not what’s happening,” Dream says, condescending and mean and all the things that George never knew him to be.

“It feels like that,” George complains. His voice is getting louder, he doesn't even know when it started. “You’ve always been a shitty friend, no wonder your ‘apologies’ are just as bad.”

Dream scoffs. “You haven’t even let me apologise yet.”

“Because I know it wouldn’t be worth it.” Quick, bitter. The wind outside turns and thrashes and sends snow thudding to the ground. “You’re not worth it.”

“Tell me George.” Dream leans in, there’s a distance between their bodies and still, Dream manages to make George feel like they’re almost touching. Rage makes him pretty, the way his face flushes pink and his teeth grit together almost makes Dream alluring. George should have known that even with time, getting over a childhood crush would be difficult. “Out of all the coffee shops in the world, why did you waltz straight into mine even after you knew I worked here?”

It only catches him off guard for half a second.

“Don’t give yourself so much credit,” he mutters, only half lying when he talks. “It’s not because of you, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Dream’s cocky, confident even when it looks like confrontation is going to make him topple over. His hands shake when he doesn’t think that George will see. Maybe both of them are in a little over their heads. “It seems like it is.”

“You’re even more stupid than I thought.”

“I can’t believe you,” Dream almost laughs, biting, scratching, making the room feel that much smaller. “After all these years you’re still blaming me for everything that’s ever gone wrong in your life.”

Dream has nerve, George will give him that. He thinks that he’s allowed to talk to George like he’s the one in the wrong—it’s rich. There’s no stopping the hostile laugh from leaving his lips. “Who else is there to blame?” He asks, looking around for an answer that’s clearly right in front of him. “Because it sure as hell isn’t my fault.”

“I don’t know,” Dream says, exasperated. “But you can’t pin everything on me.”

“Yes, I can.” In the middle of a storm, George takes a breath. Maybe they should have put their knives down already, stopped yelling at each other instead of speaking, but the one thing that George knows is that he’s allowed to feel sad. He’s allowed to grieve the things that he’s lost and Dream can never take that away from him, even if they’re both stepping over the fine line that borders the wrong. “You’re the one that stopped calling, you’re the one that forgot about me and

cast me to the fucking side, and you never once contacted me again. You stayed here and shipped me off to die in a different state, Dream.”

The words catch in George’s throat. They cut him off just slightly before he chokes and bats his eyes a few times to stop them from stinging.

It’s gotten warmer, he almost feels heat dragging up his skin.

“That’s not what happened.” Dream doesn’t sound too sure of his words.

Emotions are difficult to handle, George thinks he hates each and every one of them. He’s always been told he’s overly dramatic, or too sensitive for the world to handle, but he doesn’t need that claim to be proven by silver, undeserving tears rising from behind his eyes.

“Let me ask you one thing,” he says before giving himself the chance to break.

It’s not worth it to be back, to see Dream standing perfectly fine without him. It’s just another reason for George to know he’ll never belong in a small town like this, because the little things are what get to him. He reads into everything and pretends he doesn’t

“Why?” George’s voice cracks. It’s ugly, and it’s raw, but there’s no chance of him stopping it. “Why didn’t you want me anymore?”

The world can’t stay quiet for long. George’s words go up like flames on an open fire.

“Whatever you’re thinking, it’s wrong.” Dream keeps his tone steady, treating George like he’s explosive. “I never wanted to let you go.”

Lips curl up, scornful. “But you did.”

“I know.” It’s the first time that George has let Dream speak, maybe the first time he’s actually listened too. “And I fucked up.”

He doesn’t answer so Dream knows it’s not good enough—that George wants something bigger than a few simple words. He doesn’t know why Dream did what he did but he wants to find out, then he can stop living like a shell of a person and actually give the world a second chance.

Studying Dream’s expression gives George nothing of substance. They don’t look each other in the eye anymore, the storms taken half the power so they’re existing in darkness with a few shimmering lights left to glow. He takes a deep breath, steadies himself before finally letting himself hear, still unable to get away from the thought that tells him it was always his fault.

“I was scared, George.” It’s a small opening, Dream sounds like he means it though. “That, and so fucking dumb. When you left, you took my entire life with you. And I didn’t know what to do with myself anymore. I wouldn’t answer your calls because I was crying, and I didn’t know how to send a message that wasn’t just me begging for you to come back, I couldn’t ruin you with that.”

George’s mind doesn’t process the words. Dream *left* him, didn’t he?

“I don’t understand.”

“I missed you,” Dream stresses. “You idiot. I missed waking up in your bed, going swimming, and stealing cookies from Sapnap’s mom on Sunday’s. And it felt like you were just moving on—trying to start a better part of your life, and I couldn’t risk ruining that for you because I’m selfish.” A pause. One. Two. Repeat. “I wanted you to be happy, and successful, and that wouldn’t have

worked if I was still keeping you here.”

There’s too much to process—Dream’s final words send George spiralling.

“In a town that I know you hate.”

In the end, an explanation doesn’t make things better. George hates Dream, but he can’t feel angry in the way he had before, because it’s not a lie, George can look into Dream’s eyes and see that first-hand but that doesn’t stop it from hurting all the same.

Dream *cared* for him. Dream wanted everything even though he knew that he wouldn’t be involved in that existence. And that’s painful, that’s masochism at its finest, because who the fuck decided that George would only be happy if he didn’t have his best friend with him?

“I knew I made a mistake once I saw you though,” Dream continues, not knowing when to stop. “I saw you and you didn’t smile at me, you were mad, rightfully so. And up until that point I don’t think I thought about what that could do to a person. I think I just let myself believe you were going to be okay no matter what.”

George barely even notices the way his breathing gets quicker, a state of panic being worked up to so quickly that he might just faint. This is awful, this is terrifying, and the locked fucking doors mean that George can’t even escape.

Still, George’s voice is soft, unfamiliar to even himself. “That wasn’t your decision to make.”

“But I made it,” Dream comments. He says it like it’s final, like George should be grateful for the way things turned out even though they both regret every step. “And now you’re going to get a degree, and graduate, and be the best fucking thing that’s ever come out of this town.”

“I was thinking of dropping out,” George mutters, he has to ruin the moment. “University is lonely when you have no friends.”

“You can’t,” Dream pushes.

“I can.”

The down times are still awkward. George mulls over the thought that Dream didn’t do everything in life to spite him, even if that’s a hard pill to swallow. When he was gone, Dream could have moved on, found a better place to live in and a better job to start, god knows he has the potential, but he’s still here. After everything, through every storm and every heatwave, every unnatural phenomenon that pushes people together and apart, Dream is still there, constant.

Maybe he thought about them as much as George did. Their past and their future and every little thing that could influence the decisions they made. It’s not exactly smart, but it’s them, and to some extent, maybe things don’t have to end in ruins.

“The next time I leave,” George starts. “I’m giving you my number and you’re going to call.” He shouldn’t say it. It’s too early to be thinking about the future but George has always been one to rush the things he thinks won’t blow up on him. “That is, if you want to fix things?”

And Dream looks as though he’s been given the golden ticket. He looks as though George has said the thing he’s wanted to hear for years, granted him his wish even though this gesture is more for George to heal than it ever will be for Dream to reconcile all he’s done wrong.

George should have talked to him more before he left. They should have figured things out instead

of just hoping that hot glue would keep everything stuck together.

“I’d like that,” Dream smiles. It’s only small. A smile, nonetheless. “Maybe the guilt of not calling will finally make me do the right thing, you know?”

George’s inhale is sharp. “You felt guilty?”

“Every fucking day,” Dream mutters. “In my head, I think I managed to justify it, but I never really convinced myself. And by the time I thought that I might not have done the right thing, it was too late to call—I didn’t know what to say.”

“I’m still pissed at you.” George doesn’t know if it’s true, he says it anyway because it feels like the easiest way to mend a wound. “But I’m tired.”

It’s still dark outside. There’s enough time for George to lie down and catch up on a few hours. He wonders if Dream will do the same.

The bitter silence of company is different. George thinks he should be filling the space with something worthwhile.

“Dream,” George mumbles instead. He only looks at him for half a second, enough to drag eyesight over. In all honesty doesn’t know how he got here, why he’s looking at his childhood best friend and feeling everything except hate, the one thing he thought he was sure enough on to never take back. But he won’t complain, because if he does then he might ruin it one more time, and George doesn’t think that he can deal with any more pain in his life. “I’m glad I get to see you again.”

Dream doesn’t even need to speak.

~

George is woken by the sound of a door slamming shut.

He jolts in place, peeling the side of his cheek off of the table while wrapping a blanket even tighter around his chest, doing his best to stay comfortable even when he doesn’t know where he is. On the opposite side of the table is Dream, groggy and barely awake and they both only manage to look at each other for half a second before they’re tearing their eyes away and trying to remember all the things they said last night—think of the reasons why they should be embarrassed to breathe.

“Oh, what are you guys doing here?” The woman by the door asks.

And the door. It’s open.

George is free.

“We got snowed in,” Dream says, full regain of his voice with deep tones and sleep in his eyes. “George, do you want a ride home?”

His throat feels dry. Waking up has only made him silent. “Yeah, please.”

The owner offers to make him a coffee as an apology. He takes it even though the taste makes his

nose scrunch up and the bags under his eyes grow worse. Last night is confusing, George doesn't even know how to feel, but he doesn't have the energy to be hostile, so instead he smiles and takes his drink, following Dream out to his car while frostbite nips at his nose.

The car ride home is in silence. If Dream remembers the roads and exactly where to drop George off then he doesn't mention it—doesn't think it appropriate.

Dream's a good driver. He runs the road as though they're smooth and doesn't start small talk because he knows that George will hate it. It's that familiarity that makes George tense.

Falling for Dream again would be easy—in George's opinion it would also be incredibly dumb. He watches two hands on the wheel, stares at the way they shift and move all while blaming it on the fact that he's barely awake. Apologies are hard to process and on the ride back George takes his time going over every single moment, just to check if he made a fool out of himself.

They pull up outside of George's house, the car slowing and Dream offering to walk George to the front door—which is politely declined. But this time when George goes he looks back, he waves and smiles, and curses the snow for making him doubt all of the things he knew.

“Bye Dream.”

Even the smallest of responses is worth it.

“Bye George.”

~

*George is leaving his teens when he thinks that something might be wrong with him.*

*His final years will still stretch for long enough, but that feeling of missing out on the world still acts in haste as George sits on the floor of a bedroom that isn't his own and wonders when things started to go wrong. It's embarrassing—what got George into this state in the first place, but in his mind it's still a valid fear to have. Because being this old and still not having had his first kiss certainly isn't something to brag about.*

*His moping has to be obvious, the way his hand props up his head and his legs are crossed under him shows all of his emotions, and what doesn't help is the way Dream is gawking at him as though this is the biggest news he's ever heard.*

*“Wait, you're serious?” he gapes, staring at George from where he sits cross-legged on the bed.*

*There's a scowl on George's face, it only deepening when he nods his head and elongates his words. “Yes.”*

*“What?” Dream laughs, confusion in the bite of his tone. “How have you never had your first kiss?”*

*And it's not enough for George to just feel bad about it in silence, Dream has to make him feel that much worse by giggling like it's hilarious, ogling at him like he's something of a spectacle.*

*“I don't know,” George shrugs, dejection is evident. “No one wants to kiss me.”*

*“That's not true,” Dream sighs.*

*“Well it seems that way,” George groans. His head tips to the side, hair hitting the edge of the bed*

where Dream looks down at him and pouts. “And now I don’t know what to do, what if I suck at it.”

“You won’t.”

“But what if I do?” George stresses. He looks up at Dream and puts on his most hurt expression. “Then I’m the freak that doesn’t know how to kiss.”

“You’re blowing this out of proportion,” Dream says, rational as always.

George frowns. “I’m not.”

And in all truth, he doesn’t really know what he wants Dream to do. He doesn’t know what he wants out of it all—whether a solution would help or polite words and a tap on the back would be the cure to everything. But what George does know is that he doesn’t expect Dream to actually try, to help and come up with an answer that leaves him stupid.

Dream doesn’t look away. “Well, I could teach you?”

At first George thinks he just didn’t hear it right.

“Teach me?” He echoes.

But Dream doesn’t take it back. He doubles down, head dropping to put himself that extra inch closer to the other. “To kiss.”

On dark nights, in solitude and solitude alone, George has let himself think about the type of guy that Dream is. He sits on his bed, above the sheets, and tries not to make eye contact with the photos on the wall, the ones that plaster him and his friends in low quality fuzz.

In all of his imaginations (and maybe in reality too) Dream would be a good kisser, gentle, playful, and George would be lying if he said he wasn’t jealous of the girls that Dream has already kissed—the ones he’s spoiled and given the whole world to. But even with perfection, Dream has never had a relationship that’s lasted longer than a few months, girls come and go, a guy lasted for less than a week.

“To kiss,” he repeats, blank.

“Yeah,” Dream mumbles. If George were any more red then he’d be a tomato. “Be your practice.”

He shouldn’t be making it this obvious but there’s no point in even trying to stop. Dream has to see the way George looks at him in secret. He must know the way the other feels.

“Why would you help me?” George asks. He’s not too sure he wants the answer.

“Because I’m your best friend.” Dream shrugs like it’s obvious, like all best friends just kiss for the hell of it and haven’t liked each other since they were kids. And a drop of the tone makes George scoff, something dark running down his spine even though it’s stupid to hope. “Plus I get to make out with you.”

“Shut up,” he whines, hitting the bed next to Dream’s shin. “You’re such an idiot.”

The day is dying, blue skies only turning grey as George sits and huffs. If he were to pay a little more attention then he might see the red on Dream’s cheeks for what it is, maybe he’d stop and think that this is what they’ve become, inseparable in a way that would scare even his younger self.



*But Dream helps him wave off the thought with a shaky smile and outstretched hands, pulling George up with a small, “Whatever, come here.”*

*He practically drags George up, pulling him on the bed and on his chest with a laugh and a smile that doesn’t notice the way George’s heart jumps in his chest.*

*“Do you actually want me to teach you?” He asks, shuffling back while George follows.*

*He’s on his knees in front of Dream, sitting between his feet while staring at the headboard behind him. There’s no way to ask for what he wants, no way to figure out the things he’s been thinking for a while, but when his breathing lurches and runs, there’s no use in passing up this opportunity either. Because it just might be the only way to ever get over a stupid not-crush.*

*“Please,” George murmurs.*

*He doesn’t quite know how to go about it all—if he should wait or take the initiative to do what he’s intending to. But he doesn’t need to make that decision, in the end Dream is the one wrapping his arm around his waist, pulling George forward so he’s half sat in his lap and their chests are too, too close.*

*“No tongue,” Dream says like George even knows how that would go. He shifts their position, shakes them about a bit so that George is sitting fully on top of him, legs splayed out in a position that isn’t familiar. “Just let your body do what feels natural.”*

*“Is this weird?” George asks, because it feels weird. In the best possible way it feels weird, like they’re crossing some boundary that neither even wanted to be there.*

*“Not unless you make it weird,” Dream says, bringing one hand up to the back of George’s neck.*

*Like a deer in the headlights, George freezes. From here he can see Dream’s every imperfection, every dot and freckle, even the lines under his eyes—the ones that crinkle when he smiles. It takes too much effort not to look down at his lips. George finds himself staring anywhere but in front of him, somewhere that won’t put him at risk of delving into unspoken thoughts that he thought he’d be rid of eventually.*

*“You ready?” Dream asks.*

*The only thing that George can do is nod.*

*He wasn’t too sure what he expected kissing to be like. Perhaps George had expected sparks, maybe fireworks and rose petals. He doesn’t get that though. Instead he gets the slow pull as Dream guides him forward, the softness of lips on his as his jaw is pulled down, messiness as Dream bites his lip and keeps him waiting.*

*There’s no real way to describe it other than for George to state that he’s never been as vulnerable with anyone else. Here, he lets himself look stupid, kisses back just barely because he doesn’t really know where to put his hands or the angle to tilt his head at.*

*And Dream is the only person that can make George feel as though he’s not on his own in this. He makes sure that George is kissed in the way he’s always wanted, that he’s trying to find more in the slightest of touches. It’s bittersweet—sour even though this is better than all the stars in the sky, more pure somehow. Because even if Dream and George are kissing and it’s everything that George has ever dreamed of, he still knows that it can’t last forever, and even worse, it can’t happen again.*

*Dream bites on George's lower lip when he disconnects their mouths. He laughs at a bewildered expression and does all the sultry little things that George can't help but melt in front of.*

*Confidence is in Dream's question. "How was that?" He asks, knowing full well it was the best thing in George's small life.*

*"Good," George nods, red in the face and fuck he wants to do that again. "That was good."*

~

With only a few weeks left in hell, George starts to wonder what he'll do next.

Maine won't last forever. Christmas will be over so quickly that George will be shipped off in mere moments, but for now he's going to enjoy it. It's the least he can do now that he doesn't hate the guy he has for years.

In front of his parents, George is happier. He knows that they know, that they've seen how he actively invites himself downstairs to watch movies or just hums a song that he normally wouldn't, but there's no way for them to tell the cause. They can't see George's contacts and how he's been messaging an old number more than he's messaged anyone else, just figuring some things about and catching up on the things they've missed with time.

Sometimes it hurts to hear how Dream's been doing, but George likes the fact that they can talk again without it being too forced.

He's still scared, of university, of Dream, but now he gets morning messages that ask how he slept, gets someone telling him goodnight before he drifts off, then wakes up to a spam of little things that detail the other's day, and that makes it worth it, he thinks. He can deal with the dark, lonely nights as long as he isn't really alone, has someone to make him chuckle in the cloud of his mind.

Sapnap makes sure to quiz him on it the next time they see each other. Clearly, he's taking credit for the development in George's thoughts, but he's polite enough to not rub it in—grab George by the hair and slap him for being so stupid.

"Dream says you guys have been messaging," he says. "Is that true?"

"Yeah," George admits, sighing over a cup of coffee. "I think we're friends."

"So you guys talked?"

"We were forced to," George tells him, finding humour in his memories. "Snow is my worst enemy."

Christmas is approaching fast and George is still blank on what to buy anyone. He bought Sapnap a Pokémon deck and a cheesy card with Santa holding his dick on the cover, and he bought his dad a screwdriver as per his request. He'll find something for his mother at the local jewellers he's sure, but Dream is still something he hasn't been able to think about.

What does he even buy for his ex-best-friend-turned-friend-again? A card, maybe some socks? He's drawing a blank and there isn't really that much time to fix it, then again, who says that Dream will even get him something anyway?

On the 22nd, George sits on a park bench with Dream next to him. There's a distance between their bodies, a sizable space between their thighs, and it's still comfortable, like they're working towards something closer.

"What are you doing for Christmas?" George asks into the air. His hat is pulled down past his ears, keeping him toasty when the blizzard still hasn't gone down to nothing. "I haven't seen your family around."

"Oh," Dream sighs, taking a breath like this is a conversation he wasn't expecting. "They moved."

"Where?"

"Florida," Dream says. "Said they wanted to see the sun."

It's quite honestly the last thing that George ever expected. He can remember seeing Dream's mom stand outside his house in the summers, bringing them lemonade and making them pie when they asked for it. It always seemed like such a happy house, nothing for them to ever leave.

"So are you going to go visit them?"

"No," Dream mumbles, shaking his head and looking down. "Didn't want to get on the flight by myself."

George can relate to that.

"So what are you doing?" He asks.

"Well, me and my cat might have a nice meal together," Dream laughs, playing with his own hands as he leans forward to watch a snowflake melt. "Watch a few movies and then get an early night."

"You're kidding."

Dream just shrugs.

Maybe a Christmas gift in the traditional sense is hard to find. When shopping, there's nothing on the shelves that George *knows* that Dream will like. It seems like he's happy without the material things, trivial items that he'll throw out one day when he's finally packing boxes. So George gets an idea, and in retrospect it's probably dumb, and if it doesn't work out then he'll have singlehandedly torn apart his entire holiday with only a few words, but he has faith. Dumb, stupid, faith.

"Feel free to say no," he starts, already stumbling over the sentence. "But if you wanted, you could come to mine for Christmas." A glance to Dream. A little smile that tells him he means it. "We were planning on doing a smaller thing this year, but I'm sure dad would love to see you."

"Are you sure?" Dream asks, bewilderment in his expression—something that George can't differentiate between good and bad. "I mean, is that not a big step? We only just started talking again."

It's not like university. Where George would have to make the best impression and be careful with everything he says in case he makes that bad impression that'll label him forever, be internalised into his personality so that it's all anyone sees when they notice him. Here, George doesn't mind if he says something stupid because they've been through the motions enough for them to know each other's flaws.

George might just be ready to take a risk.

“I know,” he admits. “I wouldn’t mind spending the day with you though, if you want.”

And Dream’s smile is once again golden.

“I’d love to.”

~

“So?” Sapnap says down the phone, “Christmas with Dream.”

Even now he’s back in the state, a phone call is easier than meeting up—George doesn’t need to get dressed to take a phone call.

“Shut up, Sapnap,” he says, lying on his bed with his face to the ceiling.

“I’m not saying anything,” Sapnap grumbles, definitely saying something with his tone. “I just thought you’d still be mad at him.”

Breaths get stuck in George’s throat, trapped.

“I am,” he confesses, closing his eyes to rub a hand down his face. He can pretend to be eloquent, know why he does the things he does. “But there’s no use being angry at the past, I’m trying to move on.”

There’s a small commotion on the other end of the phone. A sound that could be interpreted as Sapnap talking to someone else before turning his attention back to him, and George half wonders if there’s someone in Sapnap’s apartment, a person that he’s sharing things with that isn’t George. “Well, make sure to get him something good.”

George pauses. “What?”

“Get Dream a good gift?” Sapnap deadpans, taking a moment to let the words sink in. “Me too actually, I want something expensive.”

“Fuck you.”

“Have you seriously not got him anything?”

It’s a little too embarrassing to say that the gift is himself, their friendship and time together where George is allowed to introduce Dream to his family once again and act as though everything is perfect. So he goes back to a soft laugh, turning his head to one side to let it rest on his pillow and angle his features to the sky.

“Shut up.”

~

“Earl Grey?”

George sits on the tall stool of the coffee shop, elbows on the counter when they pull through the slowest hours of the day, barely managing to get through each sentence without a yawn. Dream doesn't need to ask what he's going to order anymore, by now he knows, but he asks anyway just in case George decides to be daring one day—on the off chance he takes a step out of the box and likes it.

“Yeah.”

He pulls the cup towards him, rolling his eyes at the picture on the side. “Did you draw a heart on my cup?”

Dream's grin isn't subtle. “Maybe.”

“You're an idiot.”

~

“Mom,” George says on the 24th, it's a little late but by now he needs to say something. In reality, he should have probably done this a while before. “I was wondering if it was alright if Dream comes over for Christmas?” Caution, calm. He's facing his mother on the double couch and not making eye contact in case she doesn't find his actions that funny. “I might have already invited him.”

“You're talking to Dream again?” Is all she says.

“Yeah.” George looks at the TV as though it's out. “It's only recent. I don't know if we'll keep in contact after this, but I've missed him.”

He can feel the eyes on him, how they silently probe with enough hesitation to make him feel delicate, vulnerable. It's a feeling he's all too familiar with, one that he's learnt to be scared of and take with haste. But this is family, his mother isn't going to hurt him.

Still, her voice is quiet, a possible tremble in her tone when she speaks. “There's always space for Dream here, honey.”

Maybe in the back of his mind, George always knew that, but still, it's better to ask than assume.

“I'll just tell your father to make sure there's an extra place to set at the table.”

~

*The mailbox has been camped out for the past week. In old fashion, George pretended not to care about the letter he's waiting to arrive, it's just a letter, perhaps one that holds his future, but still just a letter.*

*Dream however, seems more excited than him. Every day, during the mornings and through the nights, he's in George's room, sitting in his bed and lying on his couch, making a little fort in the front room for the two of them to sleep in during the heavier storms in the summer. It's clinginess in its most pure form, something that George can't help but smile at when he's watching the other sleep.*

*And one day that wait finally seems to pay off.*

*Midday is when it comes, when the postman shows up outside the house and slots the mail into the box, stalking off when Dream runs out to grab the stack. And when he comes back he's smiling, waving what's in his hand at the door, and looking where George sits with a pointed gaze.*

*"Here it is?" Dream yells.*

*The logo is clear, George's name is in bold text on the front, and when he holds the letter it almost feels too light, as though they didn't want to waste paper on telling him he wasn't good enough to accept.*

*University applications are daunting—holding the letter that holds his future makes George feel weighted.*

*He can feel his parent's stares on his back, sits down on a chair to make sure he's stable. And next to him, there's Dream, grinning and happy and proud of anything that George has ever done, Dream.*

*He rips the letter open, lets the envelope fall in front of him.*

*"Well," Dream pushes. "What does it say?"*

*The words are daunting. George's mouth goes dry before he can say anything. But he's pushed by a hand on his arm, one that rubs circles into his skin and keeps him dulcet, calm. There's something that feels off about change, when life is different and there's no real way to stop it, but for what could be the first time, George feels as though this might not be as awful as the rest—it almost feels like he's in control of the things that are going on.*

*"You are admitted into the University of Pennsylvania," George mumbles, deadpan until the hand on his arm squeezes. "I got in." He realises. "I got in!"*

*Before he can even realise it, George is enveloped into a hug that leaves him breathless. He's held and he's pulled close and no, he is not crying, but a few seconds longer and he might just start.*

*"Holy shit," Dream mumbles, he can hear his parents congratulating him in the background, somehow he tunes it out to just listen to Dream. "I'm so proud of you."*

*In differentiation, there's familiarity. In winter, there's still a golden ray of sun. And George knows that it can't all be perfect but right now he thinks he's allowed to celebrate—he worked his ass off—he deserves it.*

*"I actually got in," he says against Dream's neck.*

*He can feel a hand on the back of his head. One that keeps him in place while he processes and thinks and tries not to break too much in the presence of everyone he's ever known. It's happiness holding hands with adaption—George tries not to sabotage himself too much.*

*And Dream must think that he can't hear him. He must think he's being quiet enough for George to*

*filter out his thoughts, hear the things that he wants to hear instead of all the noise that's truly around him. In a way it's bittersweet, because maybe George hadn't realised what this all meant, how home might not be here but this is the next best thing and now he's gone. But when Dream lets out a breath and buries his nose in George's hair, the only thing that George can focus on is the way broken words are spoken against him.*

*"Fuck, George. You're moving 500 miles away."*

~

On Christmas morning George wakes up like it's any other day.

He's always been an early riser, whether it's a weekend or a weekday, George has always been up at a similar time to mill around the house like he has nothing better to do—in reality, he probably doesn't. Maybe at school, he's behind on work, and tasks, and the essays they'll want the first day back, but that's not for today. Today is a day where George can be happy and spend time with the people he hasn't got to appreciate much lately.

When he was younger, George would come down at six am at their place in London to lie on his couch and stare at the presents under the tree, waiting for his parents to finally wake up and let him open everything. He'd be spoiled, with all the gifts that they could afford, depending on the year, and it'd be perfect—even when he'd be berated at 9am for falling asleep in the living room while waiting for everyone else to come.

As an adult, things are only slightly different. It's a frantic household, not busy but still chaotic, and George sits in the front room, looking out at a white Christmas with his own gifts under the tree, holding a hot drink to keep his hands nice and warm too.

He gets simple things from his parents, an empty scrapbook in case he wants to record new memories instead of just lingering on the old ones, and although they don't tell him that that's the purpose, he knows that it is. For that, he appreciates them.

They eat a simple breakfast, all gathered around the table unlike how on every other day they'd sit in the front room at different times with the TV on, passing hellos when they can and just existing in each other's presence. But George likes both, he likes how they go hand in hand and now that they're doing something together it doesn't feel forced. Being an only child was sometimes lonely, but in his older years he thinks it meant he was allowed to be vulnerable with his parents because they were so scared about getting it right.

At around midday Dream comes around, cautious. He knocks on the door and waits while George can see him from his window, smiling down because sometimes he's allowed to do that, let him.

He stops his mother from answering the door, walking forward and taking the keys from the little spot next to the door when he opens it, and for once he's not scared, he's nervous.

"Hey," Dream smiles.

George stares back. "Hey."

"Can I come in?" Dream laughs, raising an eyebrow and holding up his hands to show off what

he's holding. "I brought wine and a casserole."

"Oh yeah," George mumbles, shuffling to the side to make space. "Sorry."

He lets Dream linger in the space for a moment, closing the door and hiding the way he takes a breath with trembling hands.

"You brought a casserole?" He laughs, when he stops being a freak and realises that this might actually go well.

"Yeah," Dream shrugs. "I called my mom for the recipe. I wanted to impress."

It's like he doesn't realise the effect of his own words, how to some people a simple gesture is so so much more than that, and to George, cosying up to the family, is the perfect way to get him at his weakest.

"Well you'll certainly do that," George scoffs, opening his arms for Dream to pass him the bags. "I'll go put it in the kitchen."

Placing the food down, and putting the wine right next to it, George pretends not to notice the smile that his mother gives him.

"My grandma's coming a little later," he says to Dream, flicking the switch on the side to let the house light up, make the Christmas tree sparkle and stop him from feeling like they really are living in a world just by themselves, where Christmas could be like this every year with no repercussions. "Dad's going to go pick her up."

"Cool," Dream smiles. He lets George lead him to the front room, still holding onto one of the bags that he refused to give to George. "I've missed your house. It's a little different but it still feels the same."

They sit down on opposite sides of the same couch, separated even if it's only by a little. And as soon as they sit, Dream is dipping his hands into the bag and pulling out red wrapping paper, pushing it into George's hands with an eager smile.

"Dinner is at one," George comments, lifting the present before putting it down and sliding it across the floor until it reaches the tree. "We open presents after."

"Are you kidding?" It's like Dream's jaw drops. "At my house, we'd open everything before breakfast. It was like a race to see who could get downstairs first."

"Well you're in my house now." It almost feels weird to say. Dream is at his house. Dream is at his house and George is ready to let him stay.

They barely get through the next hour without George overthinking it. His grandma shows up eventually, pulling him into a hug and then pulling Dream in too, like she knows them both equally. Watching Dream laugh and make his grandma do the same shouldn't feel as good as it does.

In a sense, Christmas is like every other day. More food and people of course, and the food is amazing, as usual, but in the end it's like every other day, just with George sitting between a bunch of people and letting himself feel happy.

"Is this awkward?" He asks at one point, full and tired, with enough turkey in his system to make sure he doesn't go hungry for another week.



Dream raises an eyebrow. "Is what awkward?"

He must know, perhaps he's just teasing and trying not to be too obvious, because George is pretty clear with what he means—especially when he pouts and says it anyway, regretting a shaky tone. "You being here, when we barely even know if we're friends."

"I don't think it's awkward," Dream says, easing his worries. "Nothing is unless we make it."

And there's truth in simple things. It doesn't have to be bad, it doesn't have to be anything. It's whatever they make it, and George needs to shake that into himself to get a bit of sense.

"Okay," he mumbles, pensive. "Okay."

Seeing everyone open presents is fun. Dream gives his mother a pendant, and his dad some socks, saying he wasn't too sure what to buy but he called his mom and she said that the necklace symbolised good faith and prosperity, something that George's mother would really appreciate. And she does, she loves it and she envelopes Dream in the biggest hug, smiling at George like he's found a keeper and making sure to mouth it to his grandmother too.

And if Dream knew the effect that he had then he'd likely be far more happy than he's letting on, because right now he looks nervous, sneaking glances every half a second at George like he wants to be saved, but he doesn't need it. He's doing perfectly fine on his own.

He fits in, somehow, knows all the right things to get and what to say without even thinking about it. George pretends it doesn't make him ridiculously happy just to know.

"And finally," Dream says, turning to George with a small grin. "For you."

He hands across the present he'd had before. The one that George had taken and moved and pretended he wasn't curious as to what it was.

They're in the presence of his family but they aren't really being watched, analysed for their every movement's meaning, so George shuffles a little bit closer, acting like his fingers brushing over Dream's in a simple exchange doesn't make his heart melt.

"What is it?" He asks, moving to rip open the paper before he's stopped.

"Just wait before you open it." Dream pauses like he's taking a breath, as though he's scared of what's about to leave his lips. "When you went away, I did write, I just never sent the letters."

And that was not what George was expecting.

"I don't understand."

"I wanted to write about you," Dream rushes to explain, taking George's hand as though it's a simple gesture and not a thousand times more when he pulls it a little closer. "Document all of my favourite memories and write a few of my worst too. This doesn't include the letters, but it says everything I was feeling when I wrote them."

George glances down. He doesn't understand.

"This is a proper apology." Dream continues. "It's my manuscript and an offer for a new beginning. And I don't want you to open it up until you're ready to dig up the past."

George's mind is still on one thing. "Where are the letters?"

He doesn't like being lied to. But being told the truth after so long feels more like an obstruction of truth than a lie.

"I still have them," Dream says, simple, a fact. "But I think that seeing them would only hurt you."

There's something sweet about the gesture. George is curious, interested in what's to come, but he can't hide the smile that's on his lips. He might finally get his best friend back, maybe he'll even get more.

"Thank you Dream."

He can't help but laugh to himself when he remembers what's under layers of badly done wrapping. "My gift is shit in comparison," he chuckles when Dream gives him a confused look.

"What is it?"

"It's a fucking coffee cup."

~

The night ends with charades. Dream and George pair up just to crash and burn when his dad and his grandmother wipe the floor with them. Still they have fun, losing at every single game they play just because they keep begging for another chance to prove themselves even though they can't stop their streak.

George's dad calls his grandma a taxi at around 10, when he's tired and wants to take the leftovers and go. And George is still wide awake so he makes Dream stay, coerces him into watching a movie and lying with him full body on a couch that isn't meant for their frames. They somehow manage to fit.

"Today was fun," Dream smiles. His hand is around George's shoulders, he's not even sure how it got there. "I liked spending time with you and your family."

In a room full of people he hasn't seen in ages, Dream still manages to fit in. He talked to George's grandmother like they were best friends, spoke to his parents like they had so much to catch up on, and in a way George appreciates it, because above all else, Dream makes an effort. He's not just here because he was invited, but because he wants to be.

"I liked spending time with you too," George huffs, shifting a little when he tries not to blush. "It's been too long."

"I know," Dream groans. "I should have tried harder to stay in contact."

He doesn't know when they started to joke about it. But after acceptance, there's forgiveness, and then after that there's healing. And George didn't know that healing would feel so good.

"Yeah, you should've," he says. There's no malice in his tone.

It's the point of the night where they start to get tired, when it gets hard to keep his eyes open, and Dream could easily ask to take the couch and George would say yes, probably even stay on it with him. But he doesn't see that happening. For now, when they're still in that painful stage they call

absolution, they'll take it one step at a time, go slowly so they know that this is the right thing to do.

Still, George can't help himself from asking.

"It's getting late," Dream mumbles. "I should go home."

"Do you have to?" George whines, slinging another arm around Dream to keep him close. "We could have a sleepover, like old times."

Closeness can also mean vulnerability. George lets Dream take before he changes his mind.

"I should probably go," Dream says. He's always been the more sensible one out of the two, and even though George knows that it's probably the best idea he can't help but feel a little stung.

"I'll walk you to the door," he says in place of complaints.

One of his legs has pins and needles, he has to shake it off while Dream watches and laughs and pretends he's not in the exact same state. In one of Dream hands, there's the mug that George had gifted him, a silly little thing that he never really asked for. But he treasures it like it's everything he's ever wanted, the nicest thing he's ever owned.

"This was fun," George says at his front door. The stairs down are where Dream stands, protected by a little roof before he's forced out into the snow.

"Yeah," Dream agrees. His smile is gorgeous.

When his hair gets wet it curls, slightly twisting at the front and falling down in little blond strands in front of his face. It's a sight that makes George smile, tilting his head when he leans his side against the doorframe, and if he were to really fool himself, then he'd think that Dream is looking at him with the same awe.

There's no telling when George will finally snap, when the feelings he's always harboured will bubble and make him do something irrational. But forces work fast when he's high on life and spirit, maybe staring at Dream isn't the worst thing that he could indulge in.

He hears a scoff before he sees it. "Is that mistletoe?"

George looks up.

"What the fuck."

There's not a lot to do other than look.

"I won't kiss you," Dream says like he was thinking about it, like in another time, maybe another life, he would. "That's probably too much for now."

Sometimes, George feels daring. "Is it bad that I don't really care?" The creak of the floorboards means that George stays still while Dream moves, not knowing what to do other than wish a flustered, "Merry Christmas Dream," and just wait the rest out.

A kiss to George's forehead. Another to his lips, so quick that George could almost believe he imagined it if it weren't for the way Dream shuffles on two feet with nerves.

"Merry Christmas, George."

And late that night, maybe even delving into the early morning, George sits on his bed and tears open neat red wrapping and a little green bow. The book he finds is brown and it's cover is leather, and the very first page has Dream's name scribbled so awfully into the paper that it's almost funny.

He makes sure to read every word, dissect Dream's every insecurity and nit-pick at the smaller things. It takes him a few hours, and by the end of it he's numb. Because Dream hurt, and George never really acknowledged that—he never gave Dream the time to experience pain or even try to understand what it was like.

George cries into his pillow for an extra hour that night before he finally drifts off.

~

*"You promise to keep in touch?"*

*Dream's smile is wide, hands on his hips when he leans against an open door and watches George struggle to balance his bags.*

*"Of course," George scoffs. Because it's just university, there's no way that he'd let Dream go for something as stupid as that. "What's 500 miles when you're us?"*

*"Exactly," Dream laughs. "We'll be over it in no time."*

*They make no move to touch. All they do is stare at each other from safety behind doors. And somehow it's awkward, it's never been awkward before, but somehow George doesn't know what to do. He can hear the doors slam behind him. His flight is in three hours and yet he's still here, saying goodbye to the best friend he's ever known.*

*With age, Dream got wise. They aren't the same kids they were the first time they met, now they're so much more and that's almost too much to handle.*

*"George, the car is running."*

*He can hear his mother's voice behind him.*

*"Coming!"*

*A stand-still is fixed by Dream's smile, the thing that always solves George's every problem. "A hug for the road?" he asks, open arms ready for George to walk into. He almost looks nervous about asking, like he really thinks that George could ever say no.*

*"Come here, you idiot," George chokes. He walks into Dream's grip, drops his bag to make sure that the hug is tight enough for their lungs to stop walking. Hugging isn't something they ever did often—Dream was touchy and George was too, but they never really acted on it. Instead, in their last few moments of life, George mourns the fact he'll never be able to make up for the years of touch they never got to have. "I'll miss you, Dream."*

*And if George is on the verge of tears, then Dream is already there. "I'll miss you even more, George."*

*George's biggest regret might be the fact he never kissed him.*

~

Seven am doesn't look good on George. He's barely slept, hasn't had enough time to himself to really know what he's doing. But he's on a mission and he can't stop, running through the streets like a madman is just something that'll get him there.

At one point, Dream must have told him where he lived, the passcode too having slipped when he got a little tired and hung up on caffeine on George's couch. So George knows where he's going, he knocks on a wooden door far too early, a book in his hand and desperation in his eyes.

He needs this. Dream needs this too.

It takes about four knocks for a muffled yell to come from inside the apartment; George stands there and bounces on the soles of his feet when he hears the rattle of a key and the opening of the door. And Dream looks surprised to see him, but honestly, who else would come running this early in the morning?

"George?" He questions, being knocked to the side by a man with intention. His clothes are in disarray, a sleepshirt hanging down past his hands and off one side of his collarbone, and sweats drag down his hips to make him look a little longer, with a small bit of skin showing on his stomach.

Now isn't the time to look though, George has more important things to do.

But then again, Dream's apartment is well-lived in. His shelves are stacked with books and there are used candles on the side of every table. It's messy, cluttered, there are clothes on the radiator and hanging off a rack, with a large, badly decorated Christmas tree in the corner even though it's simply not Christmas anymore. And for anyone else, George might hate the look, but somehow this is so uniquely Dream that he can't fault it.

Even though his parents have lived in it for years, George's home still doesn't look this lived in. It seems like Dream doesn't just come home to sleep and eat and dress, but he comes to be comfortable, hand-feed his cat and love the world he's been forced to live in.

"Where are they?" George asks once he's looked around. He must look awful, but he doesn't really care.

Dream's tone is slugged with sleep. "Where's what?"

Frantic, he shakes the book in his hands, begging Dream to stop fucking with him for once in his goddam life. "The letters?"

"Good morning to you too, George." There's a small laugh, a shake of the head while Dream tries to catch up. "What time is it?"

"Shut up," George groans. He takes another step into Dream's space, scouting out the area. "Show me them."

Finally, Dream takes him seriously.

“They’re not pretty,” he admits, not really arguing as he locks the door with his back to the other.

“I don’t care,” George states. “I want to see them.”

He’s not too sure what he was expecting, but for Dream to be so calm, it almost feels wrong, like he turned up and is still predictable, easy to read.

“I take it you read the book,” Dream says, walking past George to an open door that he walks into with ease.

“Every fucking word.”

Dream’s bedroom is the same as the rest of his place. Busy, disorganised, with sheets that somehow match his personality as he tugs them up the bed and tries to make it a little more presentable.

“What did you think?” he asks as he moves, not looking back when he drops to one knee and scrapes under his bed for something that George can’t quite see.

There are no words to describe what George really thinks, so he doesn’t answer. He purses his lips and watches from the arched doorway as Dream tries to find what he wants. And when he does it’s almost anticlimactic, because it’s just a shoebox, a tattered, brown shoebox with a ribbon tying the cardboard together. It gets placed on the bed, resting gently atop the sheets like it’s pure silk.

“Here,” Dream says, tapping the bed.

He lets George sit down, and he removes the lid, pushing it forward like he has nothing to hide.

Perhaps Dream faced his demons a while ago, right now he wants George to do the same.

He lifts paper and written envelopes and sees his name so clearly on the back, like at one point Dream had wanted to send them but he could never find the right stamp or mailbox, or maybe wanted to hand-deliver them if he came to visit. Either way, they’re past that. George just breathes and closes his eyes and takes the first look at the paper he’s handed.

“Don’t cry.”

The letters are long. George reads every single one and rubs the tears from his eyes before they even spill.

Dream is flawed, George knows that. He knows that emotions are ugly and sometimes it’s harder to keep them bottled up and make the people around happy than it is to let everything out all at once. In a way, it’s almost commendable, but now he’s on Dream’s bed, reading scratched out pen and messy, awful words that spew hate and adoration and all of the things that George thought he was going through alone.

The one thing the letters tell him is that he’s not alone—in actuality, he never was.

“I fucking hate you,” is the only sentence he can muster.

Bitten fingernails scrape the bottom of the box, scooping up the dumb blue and green friendship bracelets they made when they were fifteen, and the notes that they’d pass in the back of an English class when Dream got too bored to try, and the photos, *god* the photos, they’re the thing that makes George loose it.

“You kept all of this stuff?” He asks, sniffing slightly.

Sticky photo paper details George in a suit on the night of his first “dance” with Dream by his side. He swears his mother took the photo and never even sent it to either of them. There’s another of them in the water by the cliffs, grappling each other in a bad attempt to fight, and shove the other under. There are pictures of summer, and more of winter, of bad snowmen and brutal snowball fights—George doesn’t know how he’s meant to feel.

“Yeah,” Dream mumbles. He almost sounds embarrassed.

“I hate you so much.” George doesn’t know how Dream managed to do it all by himself. He had to be scared, hell, he still has to be. “I hate that you’re so perfect and selfish and I’m the exact fucking same, and I hate how after all these years I still feel like I’m talking to my childhood best friend whenever I talk to you.”

He lets his breathing thin.

“I hate you.”

Dream just shakes his head. “I could never hate you.”

“I’m sorry,” George starts, choking on his own breath as he looks everywhere but in front of him. “For moving away, for expecting you to just stay here and wait for me. And for not even trying to understand how you were feeling. I didn’t even think.”

“You don’t need to say sorry,” Dream mumbles. He’s just as compelling as he was when he was George’s best friend. He’s that exact same perfect guy, just a bit older with a few more mistakes under his belt. “There’s no use trying to change the past.”

“I still have things to apologise for,” George says anyway. “So do you.”

“I know,” Dream says. “And there will never be enough words for me to express how sorry I am. How much I regret not calling you back.”

The light is yellow. It’s not bright enough to reach all of the corners of Dream’s room, instead it’s all-consuming, taking the warmth from the walls and causing a shiver to run down George’s spine. Dream is so close it’s stifling.

“Is it bad that I don’t really care?” George asks, honest.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I don’t care how sorry you are,” George sighs. “I want you to apologise and I want to scream and shout at you until you know how I felt all those years, but it won’t help me. I don’t think anything will.”

There’s glass behind Dream’s eyes, a red waterline ruining appearance as he looks down with blond tufts hanging in front of his forehead. Early morning looks good on him, late nights look better, and standing in the clothes that he slept in while hanging off of George’s every word is the exact sight that George wants to see forever.

“But I want to move on,” George continues, wide eyes staring up into piercing green. “And if you wanted to move on with me, then I think we could work.”

“Together?” Dream asks. He almost sounds scared.

“Together.”

The flight from Maine to Pennsylvania is long. The few times that George has made it, he’s slept half the way and sat bored for the other. He doesn’t like Maine, he doesn’t like Pennsylvania either, but escaping one for another is the best he’s going to get so having someone come along for the ride might just make that pain tolerable.

“And when you move back?” Dream asks as if he can read George’s mind.

Tension is in the words that George speaks, a request being uttered so quietly just in case it isn’t as thoughtful as he presumed. “You could come with me?”

Silence is daunting.

“To Pennsylvania?” Dream asks. “Away from here.”

“If you want.”

Seeing Dream’s expression crack doesn’t fare well for George’s heart.

“My whole life is here George,” he’s told softly, careful like he’s a porcelain doll that could shatter at any given moment. “I have nothing in Pennsylvania, what would I even do?”

“I don’t know,” George mumbles. He’s never been the smartest, maybe he’s good at books and history and the things that only matter to academics, but when it comes to people, they’re hard to read. And Dream is the one he wishes he could understand the most. “I’m sorry, forget it, it was stupid.”

“No it wasn’t,” Dream sighs. “It just might not be the right solution.”

There’s no solution for people like them. It’s all fucking hopeless. George will move back and he’ll be miserable and Dream will stay right here without him, go through his entire life and probably be happy while George rots.

“I need water,” he says before the thought can get too far, not even waiting for the other to lead him out before standing.

The door is open, lights strung up along every banister to make the whole place that much more homely. Who is George to try and tear that apart?

He takes a glass from a shelf like it’s his, flicks on the water switch and fills up the cup to ease his shakes. Dream’s footsteps are slow behind him. Shaky hands bring the glass up to his lips, cool water sliding past and down his throat. It only takes a second for George to learn how to breathe.

Behind him, he can hear Dream deliberate, start to mull over the thoughts in his head and see which delivery will be best. What he lands on isn’t fun, or nice enough to take the pain away. But it doesn’t make George fret, because he’s taken a breath and he’s stopped assuming the worst, even if he still has a few walls up.

“If I ask you a question George, will you answer it?”

He takes a moment.

“That depends on what the question is?”

“Just promise me this,” Dream says. “Promise me you’ll be honest.”



A singular nod. "I promise."

Seconds pass like they want to drag. They make the time that much heavier, sitting on both of their shoulders and making it hard to stay above high waters. Dream lets his tone stay somber, the thing he's likely wanted to ask for a while finally being said. "Why did you come back?"

George's stomach lurches. "What do you mean?"

"You always said you hated Maine, I knew you were going to leave one day," Dream says to the ground. George is looking at him, he doesn't look back. "And I know you didn't come back for me, as much as I wish you did. So why did you come back? Why are you here?"

There's no way to explain it, other than to tell the truth.

"Oh," George chuckles, more dry than anything else. "I guess I wasn't happy at university either."

Dream's eyes tell him to go further.

"The people were different and the classes were hard, and at least here I had friends to soften the blow of moving, but there I had nothing." He looks to the side, glances at picture frames and a well-lived-in home. "I felt like I was suffocating."

"And you want to go back?" Dream presses.

"No." He doesn't know what he wants anymore. "But I have nowhere else to go."

In Maine, the winter is cold and the summers are hot. It's never been a place for George to love, or somewhere for him to call home, but then again, there hasn't been a place for him to call home in a while—he's simply existing while everyone else knows their place.

Dream doesn't feel the same. In all of George's memories, Dream has been the one to find a place or a person, and give his everything to it, he dives headfirst into the things he likes and never looks back—except when he thinks he needs to. But it's been a while since they were kids. Five days isn't enough to reconnect entirely. Dream still has a few tricks up his sleeves.

"Why don't we go somewhere else together?"

George doesn't quite know what to say.

"Where?" He asks.

Out of everyone, Dream has always known him the best. In fact, he knows him well enough to speak George's dreams and still act bashful like it's just a small idea.

"London." Dream takes a step forward. "You always said how much you missed it."

Things aren't as easy as they seem. Moving home has always just been a fantasy, somehow it doesn't feel real now that it's presented to him.

"London is expensive," he picks.

"I have money." Dream manages to talk him out of every bad thought he's ever had. "My grandma passed last year, she left a lot for college but I never ended up going. I might as well spend it on something that matters to me."

It only takes a small amount of time for them to get close. In all the years they've been apart,

Dream only got that much more attractive, it's a miracle that George has had this much self-restraint already.

"Is it bad that I really want to kiss you right now?" He asks. London with Dream is all he's ever wanted.

One hand is on his waist, Dream smiles down at him in sunrise and snow, holding emotions captive while he's the best friend that George has ever had.

"That's my biggest regret actually," Dream inhales. He might have gotten quieter with proximity, George leans a little closer just to catch every word. "Not kissing you on the day you went away."

A small laugh.

"My first kiss was my best kiss actually," George jokes. "Not sure if you could've topped it."

Green is one of the prettiest colours. It's so deep and speckled, and there are a thousand different shades just in Dream's eyes. Any closer and they'd properly be touching, the freckles that have been brought out from icy sun are probably dotted all over his own skin.

"George," Dream mumbles.

"Dream." George only knows the other's name.

"Are we moving too fast?"

"Maybe," George breathes. His eyes never leave Dream's. "I don't really care."

There's silence at the start of a morning. At a time where everyone is waking up, George stands under the dim lighting of Dream's house, pretending that the comfort of it all doesn't make his heart ache.

His emotions are his worst enemy. Nostalgia makes him vulnerable, and vulnerability has been the thing that's ruined him, but somehow standing in Dream's presence and letting himself remember the good instead of just the bad, might be what heals a broken heart.

They'll never be perfect together, they've wronged each other in so many ways that don't really matter, enough so that trying to be people that were always made for each other seems hopeless. Perhaps in another timeline they were soulmates, maybe they met in a different state and fell in love in the same way they did when they were kids. There could have been no complications, nothing that makes George hesitate when he tilts his head back and mutters the silvered words.

"Kiss me."

But when Dream obliges, George knows that it doesn't matter how they got here, the kiss is still the same.

There's teeth and tongue, and Dream acts like he's a starving man who's been given nectar and a time limit to take. It's the years where George hated him that make him push just as much into it, it's harsh colours and the softest contrast, and the way that his chest grows heavy under Dream's hands on his waist, makes George know that this is exactly where he should be.

Kissing is dirty. Dream's hand is soft on the back of George's neck, coaxing him back when he bites on a pink lip and does everything in his power to make George gasp. Soft sounds spill from his lips in an effort to conceal just how much he's thinking.

Often, people had told him that finding the perfect person would be easy, that his mind would go blank and he'd never be able to think of anything coherent, simply because he's too preoccupied with recounting the first time they spoke. But for them it's different—George is in his head and Dream is there too, but in some way their thoughts are intrinsically linked, and the chaos that's in George's head is shared messily with the frenzy that's in Dream's too.

He's aware of every little thing that's going on around them—how the Christmas lights flicker and spark, and the blinds barely manage to keep the sun's rays off of the blanket walls in George's apartment. But even with everything else going on around them, his main focus will always be how Dream is kissing him. How he's kissing Dream and doesn't want it to ever stop.

Dream is the first to pull away. He's red in the face and trying desperately to catch up on the breath that he's missed, the scrutiny of another's stare only causing that bashful look to deepen.

"You're gorgeous, George," he mutters in a last ditch effort to shift the focus off of himself. And it works because George is selfish, egocentric and shy, and when Dream compliments him his brain turns to mush.

"So are you," he mumbles, quiet. "So, so pretty, Dream."

Red, bitten lips almost sting where they sit. George knows how addictive merciless kisses are and now he's hooked. Kissing leads them to the counter, it slams George's back to the edge and makes him flinch in pain before he's guided back to Dream's mouth and forgets everything that's ever been wrong.

In all the wrong times, George is emotional. His eyes prick with tears and he shakes them away because *god* now is not the time. And yet, this time it's not self destruction. He doesn't want to push the other away as much as he wants to be kissed until he forgets the reason he even came back.

Dream hurt him. He hurt Dream. They're both too awful for the world to accept.

"How far do you want to go?" Dream asks against George's lips. Their chests are pushed together, panting breaths being spoken so close that they can hear each sharp intake then outtake.

George's worst trait may be his want. He wraps his arms around Dream's neck and tugs him down so frantically that he should almost be embarrassed. In a world of people, Dream knows him better than anyone else without even trying to, he knows George's family and how he's been scared to sleep with the lights off since he was six, even though he does it anyway.

He knows George like the back of his fucking hand, and it hurts like a bitch when George knows that this might be their only opportunity to be close in the way he's always needed.

"All the way," George says with more determination than he's ever felt. "I know we should wait but I want you."

"Okay," Dream nods. One more kiss. Maybe another. "Am I..?"

Piercing green eyes flick down between their bodies, making George blush when he realises what's being asked.

"If you want," he smiles.

The attempt to be coy is ruined by a mulberry blush.

Teeth knock against teeth the next time George leans forward, charming Dream into a kiss with wide eyes and parted, pink lips. His hands are in blond hair, tugging and tugging as Dream kisses him without a semblance of control, making him gasp and writhe in a single space against the counter.

His hips buck up without his own influence. He's so fucking scared but they'll get through it together, Dream easing his troubles with the press of his lips against George's to make his thoughts dulcet.

The door is open and their bodies move in tandem. Dream's hands grip onto George's waist as though he thinks that any looser, and they'll lose each other again. Lights are still on, Dream's bedroom is dark, and George refuses to let him break their lip-lock as they walk just because he's wanted this so badly that now it's here, he can't force himself to let go.

Dream has to pull away eventually though. When the back of George's knees hit the bed he's pushed back and made to fall, Dream leans down to cover him almost immediately, planting open-mouthed kisses along the stretch of his neck, where the fabric of a t-shirt can't cover. Being painted in bruises isn't how George wants to go home—the questioning stares and raised eyebrows are already implanted into his head and enough to make him blush, but Dream does everything so expertly that there's no place to complain.

Teeth scrape against pale skin to cover George in pinks. Purple is what will bloom on his skin tomorrow, and he'll be holding a cold metal spoon against himself to make it look more acceptable. A shiver runs down his spine when cold hands push up his shirt, roaming over his skin while Dream bites at George's neck to make him shake.

In bed, George wants everything, and Dream is giving him that and more.

“Fucking animal,” George laughs when Dream mouths at his collarbone, ferocity in his actions.

“Take your shirt off,” Dream murmurs.

His bed is big and George is pushed into the middle, knees coming up to bracket Dream's waist as his back is arched by two hands on the low of his back, that also serve to pull his hips against Dream's. He pulls his shirt up to let the slow expanse of his stomach show, watching Dream's eyes drop and grow with hunger, and when it comes up, past the top of his chest and just above his collarbones—he lets Dream tug it off of him completely.

“You next,” George grumbles, hands coming down to grab at Dream's sleep-shirt before he's batted away—Dream's arms crossing in front of the low of his stomach to take it off completely.

George can't stop his mouth from hanging open. Serving coffee must be good for strength or something, because muscles that weren't there the last time they'd seen each other only faintly pertrue from Dream's skin. It's not crazy, to assume that he's worked out at least once, probably has a pull up bar hidden under his bed, because in lean form and wide shoulders, Dream is fit, not extremely, but still somewhat so.

Only seeing clear skin should be a sin. Dream deserves to be covered in bruises and hickies in the exact way he's left George.

“God, I want to kiss you,” George says before he thinks. That filter between his mind and his lips is almost a figment of the imagination, there's no use clawing for it back now.

Tan skin gets paler in winter, it's robbed of its colour simply because the snow wants to turn it

alabaster. In summers, Dream would get this golden shade because he'd walk around without a shirt and lie in his back garden while George sat next to him, fully clothed. But now, they're here and they're frosted, the warmth of the heater making standing shirtless seem bearable.

Dream dips down when staring starts to drag. He fiddles with the button of George's pants and presses his lips to his abdomen, letting the hands he has on the low of George's back, trail around to grip onto the sides of his waist.

"Can I leave marks?"

It's wide eyes and unabashed adoration. Dream looks up at George as though he's godly, not a broke student that can barely even manage his own emotions.

"You already have."

There's a smile against his skin. Dream bites down once again.

"Well, can I leave more?"

"*Fuck*," George gasps, keening when Dream pulls his body up from the middle and keeps him malleable. "You can."

Somehow here, he feels even more sensitive. Hands on his hips make him feel taken, like Dream can keep him steady and stable with gentle kisses and the drag of ivory teeth. Complexity is all George feels, it's what makes Dream mumble in what seems to be a foreign language when George's ears can only ring, and when precise fingers dip into his waistband but don't pull, he thinks he might just drown.

"Off," George demands, shaky.

And when the air hits his legs he can't move. When the tent in his boxers is visible just from him looking down at his own body, he only knows how to freeze, hope that everything in physical form is enough for Dream to want as much as he does.

"Gorgeous," Dream mumbles, glassy eyes, foggy mind, George can tell from just the way he stares.

"I've wanted this for so long," he admits.

"So have I."

Embarrassment is useless but George feels it anyway, and he knows that it's not enough to just lie here and wait so he takes his hands and shuffles out of his underwear while Dream watches. Pink lips stay parted, soft air blowing through them as he attempts to keep calm. And god Dream is gorgeous when he's silent and pleading with just his expression.

It only takes a few seconds for Dream to strip too—the air gets to him and George's head becomes hot, overwhelmed with the fact that this is everything and more and he'll never be able to replace this memory in his mind. He's hard, barely there and bucking up when a hand is wrapped around his cock, forcing him to gasp and shudder even though it's just a fleeting touch.

"Will you ride me?" Dream whispers, dirty in George's ear. "I want to watch you—let you take what you want."

A breath falters.

“Yes,” George says. He wants that. He definitely wants that. “Where do you keep the lube?”

“Here.” Dream moves around him to grab the handle of a drawer, pushing clothes to one side and letting his chest drape over George’s with a sight he most certainly doesn’t mind seeing, and when he comes back he’s holding a bottle that looks used, one that fits the shape of his hand perfectly.

Maybe yesterday he would have been more nervous, hard and naked on Dream’s bed when there’s been so much bad blood between the two of them. But overnight things can change. And if George woke up a new man then he doesn’t know how to feel about it, all he knows is to let down his walls and let it happen.

The bottle opens with a pop. Its cap is loud and George follows its movement, unabashedly staring at the flex of Dream’s hands as he pours lube into his palm and lets it spread over his fingers.

“Let me,” Dream mumbles, sitting between George’s knees.

There’s a hand on the inside of George’s thigh, spreading his legs apart for Dream to reach further, and at some point the angle feels rough, so Dream slots a pillow underneath his back to make sure he’s comfortable.

“Okay,” George breathes.

One finger circles his rim, it moves in circles to tease and taunts him with the idea of more. George can’t help clutching onto the sheets while he lies in unbridled desperation. Dream’s expression is blank, he watches George with gold specks in his eyes and need in his every shake, and for George there’s no one on earth that he’d rather be doing this with.

Against his stomach, George’s cock grazes against the skin and messies it with pre-cum, only serving to make him seem that much more needy. Dream’s gaze flickers from that gap between their bodies to George’s face, his hand feeling around to make sure he’s in the right spot while he doesn’t watch.

The tip of his finger starts to press in. George’s back arches.

“Fuck,” he gasps. “Slowly, please.”

Dream uses enough lube to make George’s skin wet. He pushes in to his knuckle and stays there for a second, allowing George to get used to an unfamiliar intrusion. It’s a constant drag, one push in and out while pleasure plays in rings in George’s stomach, making him delirious.

It hurts in a way. George thinks he half likes the pain.

“Slow,” George says again, a firm reminder.

Dream nods. He slows his pace, stares down at George’s expression to make sure he’s getting it right. He’s a gentleman in the worst possible way. “Of course.”

“Oh god,” George gasps, head thrown back when Dream gets confident. “Fuck, another.”

The second finger makes George lose his mind.

Calluses skim over his skin, Dream holding him like he’s a god while he’s fucked on two fingers and stretched into submission. Perfection manifests in different ways for different people, George might just think that Dream left the love language he knows best in the past and has since replaced it with this. Ecstasy.

The crook of Dream's fingers is addictive. He moves in such a way that leaves George constantly needing more, gasping and writhing in place while his thighs tremble. It's pathetic almost, how a simple touch has gotten him in this state, but there's not much that he can do other than take it—take it and plead for more.

Two fingers spread apart, they work George open and push past the sting to get him ready. His cock is leaking, hard and red as it aches against his chest. George has to grab onto Dream's shoulders to stop him from falling.

"One more," Dream mutters, teeth gritted like it hurts him just as much to say it. "One more and then you can ride me however you want."

It's not enough. George needs it so badly, and there's no way to stop those demands from leaving his lips, right until Dream shifts his hand ever so slightly to find that bundle of nerves he's been so barely avoiding.

"Fuck," George whines. "Fuck Dream that's so good."

It's like sharp pleasure shoots down his spine, makes him mindless and perfect and ready for anything that Dream's going to give him. And it's Dream, Dream that makes it all so perfect, not just the actions or the words, it's the person who's giving it all to him.

"Does it hurt?" Dream asks, curious as he lines up the third finger, wet with lube and fighting against restraint.

"A little bit," George winces. "But I don't mind."

When three fingers push in it's almost too much. It's painful in the best way possible; George's head falls back and his mouth falls open, a sound so light it's like feathers falling, spilling from his lips.

They're not being careful anymore, Dream pushes his fingers in and out with haste, pulling little gasps and moans from George's throat so expertly that it's a sin for George to not have begged for this the moment he was back. In some sick way he knew they'd be here though, there was no way to run from Dream, and no way to crowd out every bad emotion he's ever felt.

"Dream."

His voice is weak. Three fingers pull out and trail over his leg, teasing.

He can barely feel when Dream leans back, slicking himself up and switching their positions with a strong grip so that he's laying on his back while George's thighs spread over the tops of his legs. And it's not enough to just be naked and shrouded in early morning light from open blinds and a rising sun—Dream has to touch, grab at George's thighs and reach forward to hold his waist and make sure he's still there.

It's strange to feel at home. George needs to learn when to get out of his head.

He takes the lube in his own hands and squirts a bit into his palm, wrapping a palm around Dream's cock just to keep him interested. He's hard against his stomach, a perfect sight for George to stare and gape at because *fuck* Dream is gorgeous.

Treacherous waters have meant he's been scared to show too much interest, because what happens if Dream decides that letting George go again would be for the best? But right now George feels as though he's allowed to be open. Open and obvious with how much he's really missed the other.

“Do you want me to..?” Nerves sit on the tip of George’s tongue, evident in how he speaks when he glances down from Dream’s cock to his face.

A nod in response. Arousal is blatant and pretty. “Take your time.”

Sitting up on his knees, George tries to shuffle forward, trying and failing to not make a fool out of himself when Dream grabs him and tugs him forward, making sure their hips are pressed so precisely on top of each others—skin on skin, George’s thighs on Dream’s chest so he can be felt up.

One hand reaches back, guiding Dream’s cock to his rim. From this angle he feels so much bigger, like he could split George open without even trying to, and just the thought of sinking down is too much. But George’s thighs tremble, they shake and they’re weak, and there’s no chance he’ll be able to hold this position for much longer. So instead of waiting, he lets himself lower down, using one hand to hold the base of Dream’s cock and guide him in.

“You’re big,” he mutters after a second, enlarging Dream’s ego because he knows it’ll make him smile. “How is there still more?”

“I’m blessed.” Dream laughs with one hand on George’s waist, the other behind his head in a position that only makes him look like an asshole. “There you go, careful.”

He must see the way George winces, stretched open and full as he moves slowly, trying to take everything that Dream can give and steal so much more while he’s at it.

Like this, Dream feels good. When it comes to sex, he’s never been the most proud, or even good at the whole thing, but when he’s with Dream he doesn’t feel embarrassed to be begging for something—he doesn’t feel like ridiculous for making obnoxious sounds and asking for the world to be handed to him on a silver platter.

Eventually, George stops. His ass is flush to Dream’s hips, legs weak when his lip quivers and a noise that’s close to a whimper escapes his throat. There’s no energy in his veins to make him move, urgency just spreads through his chest like a wildfire, that pressure climbing in his stomach causing his actions to feel rushed and like he can’t even follow through with them.

There’s nothing to do other than let his breath hitch, jaw falling so it’s pressed against the bottom of his neck while he tries to let out words that sound real.

“Move, Dream,” he murmurs.

And Dream has always been a tease—every version of him that George has known has featured a cocky idiot that doesn’t know how to better himself without making George’s life hell in nirvana. This time there’s a smile on his lips, a sultry gaze being disguised by need as he lets ivory teeth flash and dirty blond hair fall down. “What?”

“Fuck me,” George demands, too tired for watering eyes and the back and forth of taunting. “Help me move.”

“Can you not do it yourself?” Dream asks.

The muted red on the heights of George’s face can’t simmer. It grows deeper and kindles a flame while George tries not to think about the way Dream can see it too. But in reality, Dream has seen all of George’s worst moments, this is just another embarrassing memory to add to the list (even if this one might stand out just a bit more).



“Don’t tease,” George grumbles, hands on Dream’s chest when he finds his voice—the ability to be alluring. “Just help.”

Eyelids are low, lips pressed together when George pulls his eyebrows up and tries to be desirable, and Dream is on the verge of losing it too, he can see. He dips down for a kiss, shifting Dream’s position inside of him and trying not to gasp at the way he can feel every twitch.

“Fuck,” he breathes.

“You feel so good George,” Dream groans. His hands slip down, on his waist then his ass, and just squeezing, feeling everything he possibly can. “So tight.”

One thrust of his hips makes George falter. He scrambles back up, trying not to let himself get too ruined by leaning back a little and putting his chest on show. The grind of his hips is slow, calculated, and George does everything in his power to make sure that he moves at the exact same time as Dream, picking up the pace when Dream stops and lets George do all the work.

“Want to make you cum,” George mutters. “Want to see you fall apart.”

He bounces up and down, grinds back and chases the pleasure that each drag of Dream’s cock inside gives him. It’s so good, George feels everything, and with his cock leaking and bobbing as he moves, it’s only a small matter of time before he’s gone for good.

“*Dream*,” he whines, elongating the word so he never has to let go of it.

“So good,” Dream groans. “Fuck.”

In a small town, pleasures like this are impossible. Everyone knows each other, it’s impossible to just hook up with someone without the whole state knowing. And even in university, George didn’t have the confidence to go out and get laid with someone he barely knows, maybe someone he did, but not often, few pleasures were far more important than the many to him.

So with Dream he isn’t cautious. He lets himself feel and hopes that Dream looks at him in the same lustful way—that this will be the start of something new.

“Hold my hips,” he orders, snapping in a way he never has, and the way that Dream scrambles to do it is almost funny.

“Like that?” He asks, grabbing and holding and tugging George down to fuck him senseless.

“Yeah,” George gasps. “And move.” He scrapes his nails on Dream’s chest, flattening his palms and propping himself up. “Harder.”

Helpless desperation fuels all of George’s movements. He feels weak when he repositions himself and yelps while Dream fucks up into him with ruthless, merciless thrusts. Needy, broken sounds escape his lips, a slack jaw unable to even shut. On a whim he clenches down, not even knowing what he’s doing, other than knowing he’s fortifying that need to cum, the one that tells him he’s close and won’t last for much longer.

“So fucking good,” he groans, furrowed brows and an undying moan on his lips. “M’close.”

“Yeah?” Dream sounds pornographic. “Me too.”

“Together?”

A nod. "Tell me when."

The motions are almost mean. Dream fucks George with no control, managing to make his eyes water when he doesn't want them to. Crying is for when he's alone, maybe with his parents—he doesn't need Dream to see him at his weakest even though he knows he could be ready for that change.

"*Dream*," he moans. *Fuck*, he's falling apart and he doesn't want to stop. "Don't stop, never fucking stop."

He can feel Dream's cock throb inside of him. He needs more and Dream is giving it straight to him, pleasure being strung up like it's ecstasy and fairy lights, easy, simple, and the exact thing that makes him mindless.

His mind is fuzzy, words all blur together, and Dream's face is that perfect picture of want with dark eyes and pink, bitten lips. They're almost swollen, and George knows that his are the same, but when the red waterline of his irises gets muddled with tears there's nothing to do other than let it happen, allow for Dream to watch as he chews on his own lips and tries not to draw blood.

"George, I'm close," Dream pants. His head is thrown back, tossed in the pillow as George rides him with all of the strength he has left.

His legs are burning, muscles tensing and untensing when his body shakes.

"Wait," he demands as though it's easy, like he can hold on.

"I need to."

"Just a few more seconds," he breathes, calm, dulcet. "I want to feel it."

"Okay." And Dream is nodding, he's letting George order him around because he's eager to please and doesn't know what else to do when he's lying on his back and making up for so many years of pain. "*Fuck*."

The thrusts get weaker, strength can only last for so long. And George's legs are already shaking and his muscles are quivering, so he wraps one hand around himself and moans loudly when Dream replaces it with his own.

The tugging on his cock makes him choke, twisted upstroke and squeezing the base, and George clenches down around Dream like he's being dragged through his orgasm at every given moment. It feels so good, he doesn't know how he managed to live without this—without Dream—for so long, but now he's here and he's hooked on the feeling of Dream stretching him out and fucking him dumb.

"You ready?" He asks, because Dream has to be close now, if he was before then it must be painful.

Dream's expression is weak, everything is blank and fuzzy and George knows it's mirrored on him but that doesn't mean he has to admit it to himself.

"Three." Counting down is dumb, it's only done in the movies and with the couples that are too cliché to form their own sex lives. "Two." George can't help it though, when he's being fucked his mind is on its own, fending for itself in a sea of pleasure and euphoria. "One."

"*Dream*."

George's orgasm is blinding. It drags him through the gutter and makes all of his thoughts spin on repeat while white hot pleasure shoots through him like bullets. The hand around his cock gets tighter, Dream spilling into him while he clenches down and cums on Dream's fist with his eyes squeezed shut.

*"George."*

Dream's voice makes it that much softer. When George's body collapses and he falls down, still riding out the highs, he can hear those panted little breaths next to his ear, and all it does is serve to make him even hornier. Ecstasy is only one way to put it—George feels so good, and so weak, and it's like every limb in his body has gone numb, unable to be moved while Dream still fucks up into him with less strength than before.

After a while it starts to hurt. He's so sensitive, and with Dream still stroking his cock like he's yet to cum, there's only so far he'll get before he passes out completely. Trembling legs are helped by Dream's hands when he slides off, letting out a pained breath before collapsing down next to Dream with no strength to help him through the day.

And in Winter the heating stays on forever, so comfort isn't futile just because the blankets are on the edge of the bed.

"Fuck," George groans, smiling against Dream's neck when he's tugged close—naked and sweaty with Dream's cum on the backs of his thighs.

Pre-established familiarity makes itself obvious in these fine moments. George lets himself be held while holding onto someone else, wondering how clear his nerves are when he tries to let someone in his life while knowing he was never meant for this kind of closeness.

"We should shower," Dream mumbles, easing his thoughts with a single kiss.

His skin feels tacky, gross where he sticks to himself and the sheets. And Dream's hand on his side is warm, ruining him with the simplest of touches.

"I'm tired," George says in response. Early morning light does nothing to stop his eyes from slipping shut, a struggle to keep them open with the exertion he's put his body through.

Somehow, Dream's bed feels more comfortable than his own. It manages to feel warmer.

"It's barely 11 am," Dream mutters. His tone is fond, George doesn't think himself able to hate it.

"I'm still tired."

"Come on." Fingers drum against his skin, keeping irregular patterns while George attempts to not let himself fall. "I'll shower with you."

But it's useless. In the end, the filter on George's lips is non-existent.

Thin sheets are in disarray at the bottom of the bed, their feet covered as sitting up becomes hard and jelly legs can't stay sober. George's back is flat against Dream's headboard, the only thing propping him up, himself. And Dream lies on his stomach, playing a rhythm that only he can hear on red, marked skin.

"I've missed you so much, Dream." George finds himself saying. He finds that it's easier to say it when he doesn't think—think about what missing someone really means.

"I've missed you too, George."

Dream says it like it's easy.

Amongst a world of people, George feels like an alien. He wants and he takes but most importantly, he knows that things never last forever. Still, he lets himself indulge, because learning how to feel emotions that aren't just blank after being hurt and broken isn't wrong. In fact it's as brave as he'll likely ever be.

"Can you walk?" Dream asks once silence lingers. He's not been George's best friend in a while, still he cares for him like he is.

"Yes, you sap," George jokes, to ease the air. "Don't just stare."

Kneeling Dream playfully, George pushes himself forward, wincing a little when his legs don't quite move in the way he wants them to. Being watched simply happens and George can't find the effort to do anything other than flip Dream off—to which Dream just sticks out his tongue and carries on doing what he was doing.

"I didn't know you wanted help," Dream smiles when George reaches out for him. "Do you want help getting up, George?"

And a few words are misheard, some are skipped out entirely, but George is answering a completely different question when he sighs in defeat and says, "Yes, please."

The shower is warm. George lets Dream wash his hair with expert hands and small circular motions. Dream's clothes are even warmer, having been sat on the radiator while they washed and hanging just off of his body because they were built for a taller frame.

Sitting on the bed means they're close again, with George's arms around Dream's waist and he can hide his head in his neck and slip a leg between the other's.

Every touch is soft, fleeting, but soft. And George smiles because for once it feels like he might not be alone forever, it starts to feel as though things could get better.

"I want to spend the rest of my life with you," he blurts out at one point. Tomorrow he'll say he was too out of it to even know what he was saying, but George knows, he's thought it for a while.

"Yeah?"

Dream has his head angled down, nose in George's hair. Even if he doesn't hold on too tight he feels strong, and it's far easier for George to confess to the things he pushed back when he doesn't have to look the other in the eye.

"Yeah."

Quiet. The window has frozen over with recent snowfall, speckled patterns on the glass that'll slowly fade out with the Christmas spirit of the year.

"I think I fell in love with you when we were eighteen," Dream confesses into darkness. He must feel the way that George tenses because he stops him from wriggling out of his grasp. "Don't say anything. I just wanted you to know."

A part of George has always known it, he just didn't want to feel dumb by hoping.

“When?”

“The day you left.” Dream shrugs the best he can and keeps his tone flat, an obvious effort to not make George freak out. “I watched you leave from my window, and I think I realised how hard life was going to be without you.”

In a selfish sort of way, George had never wondered how things would change for Dream once he was gone. He’d always just assumed that things would be fine, perhaps that’s why he can’t pride himself on reading other people—because when people want him he doesn’t know, and when they hate him, they don’t make it clear enough for him to stay away.

The nagging at his mind is constant; judgment is low and there’s not a lot else to say other than ask, “Are you still in love with me?”

A chuckle, low as it filters into the air.

“George,” Dream sighs. “Do you really want to know?”

Some things are better left unsaid.

“No,” George decides. He trusts Dream to tell him when the time is right, there’s no use begging for an answer to something he doesn’t really want to know. “Don’t tell me.”

Their bodies seem to meld together, fitting so perfectly that George never wants to let go. For the first time, his thoughts are calm, not painful to be around or making him seem pathetic under dim lighting that reminds him of a reality that he’ll never go back to.

But he’s not in a cramped dorm anymore, that or a place where he feels like he’ll never fit in. Now he’s in Dream’s bed, the place where he’s allowed to speak his thoughts and take them back just as quickly. Still, George’s voice feels foreign to even his own ears.

“But for the record, I think I fell in love with you earlier.”

It’s not a competition but he’ll make it one.

Heartache is a confusing feeling. Even with everything on a silver platter right in front of him, George feels numb in the most mysterious of ways. It’s like an emptiness at the top of his chest, something that makes breathing heavy and intentional when George looks at Dream and watches with dullness in his limbs.

“Probably the first time I went back to England for Christmas. I think that’s when I knew that even the places where I grew up wouldn’t feel like home if you weren’t there.”

He’s shuffled back, pointing his chin up so they can look up at each other for the first time. And tears prick again, because of course they do—crying is all that George is good for.

“I don’t know if I’m still in love with you,” he admits, because he doesn’t. He barely knows if he’s still broken-hearted. “But I could be, with time.”

“I’ll wait,” Dream says, soft. “I’ll always wait for you.”

And George knows he’s slipping, and he knows it’s too early to feel anything real, but it’s not as though he and Dream are strangers, they know each other far too well for the formalities of a normal relationship.

There's a hand on George's face, knuckles brushing against his skin so softly that he can almost imagine the feeling once it stops. Dream makes him feel delicate while proving that delicate might not be a bad thing.

"Go to sleep for a few hours," Dream murmurs. "Sapnap wants everyone to come over for Boxing Day at four."

His nose is back in George's hair, smelling coconut conditioner and running his fingers through the strands.

"One more kiss?" George asks. Tiredness shouldn't come with midday light. It shouldn't be so deeply sewn into his bones when he woke up at the crack of dawn just to sprint here.

But Dream makes him feel good. The kiss he steals feels good. And the feeling of their skin under thin sheets is like home in a place he never thought he'd find it.

"Fine," Dream mutters. "Go to sleep."

And so he does. He lets Dream plant a wet kiss on his forehead, laughing it off and rubbing his face against Dream's chest. He falls into slumber and oversized clothes, forgetting the day and barely remembering the night. And most importantly, he sleeps with no weight on his shoulders, because he doesn't mind the cold that much, and he definitely doesn't mind being covered by someone else, not when that person is Dream and he's the only protection from a state that he's never liked.

When they wake up, George doesn't know what will happen—if he'll freak out again and run or he'll let himself be won over by charm and good coffee, tea maybe. But what he does know is that whatever happens he's prepared, because the good comes with the bad, and as long as Dream is ready, George has a lot of bad left to show him.

So yeah, George hates Maine, but still after all these years, he can't find it in himself to hate Dream.

~

"Hey."

*There's a kid on a tree. A young George glances up from his place on the pavement as the moving vans roll onto the street, not bothering to go help when his father jogs out to meet them. Moving is stupid, he didn't want to move. George was happy back in London, so why should one job opportunity mean they have to just uproot their lives and jump on a ten hour flight?*

*"Hey?" George mumbles. He barely catches a glimpse of the blond kid who hops out of the tree from the house next door, the one who walks over and drops his head down as though he's trying to find George's eye. "Do you need something?"*

*Maybe he doesn't catch George's biting tone, perhaps he just doesn't care, either way the boy doesn't back down. Instead he smiles wide and stops at the ends of George's feet, kicking the road with no real malice.*

*"No," he says, light. "Maybe. What's your name?"*

*"George," George mutters. Americans. Way too friendly.*

*“Well, I’m Dream,” the kid says, pushing a hand forwards with a giddy smile so he can pull George up to his feet. “You want help settling in?”*

## End Notes

thank you [Ollies twitter](#) ty so much for betaing

comments/kudos are so so appreciated i spent a lot of time on this so id love to see and hear feedback,

PLUS COMMENTS ARE LITERALLY THE BEST MOTIVATION

istg I read back comments when I'm stuck on what to do!

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